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సమస్యను తెలియజేస్తుంది

వి.ఎస్. రామకృష్ణ నామక బి.ఎస్

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SHAKESPEARE

HAMLET

(Everyman s Guide)

COMPLETE WITH

Critical Introduction, Expository Analysis of the Play
Scene by Scene, Exhaustive Annotations Topical
Essays, Character-Sketches, Critical and
General Problems, Questions and
Answers, etc.

BY

A. N. PARASURAM, M. A.



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H A M L E T

INTRODUCTION

The Date of Composition

The upper limit for the date of *Hamlet* is fixed by the following entry in the *Stationers' Register*, dated July 26, 1602.

"A Booke called 'the Revenge of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke', as yt was latelie acted by the Lord Chamberleyne his servantes"

The lower limit may be fixed by the fact that the play is not mentioned by Meres in his *Palladis Tamia*, published in 1598. This latter piece of evidence, being negative, is theoretically less satisfactory, but is practically none the less conclusive. Meres mentions a dozen works of Shakespeare (including so doubtful a specimen as *Titus Andronicus*), and it is inconceivable that he could have omitted so popular a play as *Hamlet*. It is therefore almost certain that the play was written between 1598 and 1602 *

Any attempt to fix the date more precisely may lead us into the realm of conjecture. There is little doubt but that there is reference to some contemporary stage history in Hamlet's discussion with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about the troupe of players who came to Elsinore (II. ii). On many of the details relating to this

*There are earlier references to a *Hamlet* of unknown authorship, one of them dating back to 1589. But it is difficult to believe that they refer to Shakespeare's play. (See Sources)

reference, opinion is divided, but it is clear that Shakespeare is, in the main, alluding to the company of boy-actors, known as Children of the Chapel, when he writes of 'an eyrie of children, little eyases.'

They were installed, according to Lee, at Blackfriars about 1597, and by 1600 they had become so popular as to put the fortunes of other companies of older actors into jeopardy. There is some reason for thinking that, hard hit by this change in popular taste, Shakespeare's own company travelled in Scotland in 1601. And between 1600 and 1604, there was bitter controversy among the playwrights themselves on this subject, some favouring the boy-actors and others deprecating this 'innovation'; and the war of the dramatists is patently referred to in the same context in the play.

The reference to 'Hercules and his globe too' could not have been written earlier than 1599 when the Globe theatre with its sign of Hercules, carrying the globe, was first opened. It has also been suggested that there is a glance at the defence of Ostend (July 1601) in the Fortinbras scene.

The lower and upper limits may thus be narrowed down to 1600 and 1602. And if we consider the question of style and mood, we shall find that *Hamlet* is intimately related to *Julius Cæsar*. Both are, in a sense, tragedies of reflection, and Brutus, as many critics have noted, conveys the impression of being somewhat like a preliminary sketch of Hamlet. The description by Horatio of the omens that preceded the assassination of Cæsar reads like an echo of a passage in Shakespeare's own play on the Roman theme. According to the consensus of critical opinion, both *Julius Cæsar* and *The Twelfth Night* are to be attributed to 1600-1601. This leaves Shakespeare free to devote his attention to *Hamlet* in 1602.

This conclusion, it may be noted, is contradicted by one piece of evidence. Gabriel Harvey, a Cambridge Don, makes a reference to *Hamlet* in a marginal note in his copy of Speight's *Chaucer*. The date of the note, however, is not given. Speight's *Chaucer* was published in 1598 and as the notes speak of the Earl of Essex as still living, the *marginalia* could not have been written later than February 1601. The date of *Hamlet* has therefore to be shifted to late in 1600 or early in 1601. Perhaps, Shakespeare dealt with *Hamlet* more than once, and some of the references to the War of Theatres might have been added in the course of a revision.

It is safe, therefore, to conclude that the play was written between 1600 and 1602 and leave it at that

The Sources

The story of Hamlet belongs to the Anglo-Danish cycle of myths and legends, and its origin is lost in the mists of antiquity. It has recently been suggested that the name can be split up into a proper noun, Anle, a common Scandinavian name, and an epithet, osi, meaning first 'furious in battle' and then 'mad', and that a certain Swedish King, Onele, mentioned in *Beowulf*, is the original Hamlet*. The earliest reference to this name, however, is in the *Prose Saga* (Circa A. D. 1230) where it occurs in its Icelandic form Amloti. At the end of the 12th century (1180—1208), Saxo, surnamed Grammaticus or the 'Lettered', gives the full story in the third book of his Latin *Historia Danica*. Here is an abstract of the tale

*Kemp Malone, *A Literary History of Hamlet and Etymologies for Hamlet* (Review of English studies, III, pp. 258—271).

Horvendil and Fengon, two brothers, jointly rule Jutland under Rorik, King of Denmark. Horvendil wins renown by slaying the King of Norway in single combat and is rewarded with the hand of Gerutha, daughter of Rorik. A son, Amleth, is born to them. Fengon treacherously assassinates his brother, seizes his crown and marries his wife, "thus capping unnatural murder with incest." Amleth is summoned to revenge by his father's ghost. Wishing to gain time for elaborating his plans, he feigns a 'foolish and grotesque madness' so that 'all he did savoured of utter lethargy'. Fengon is suspicious and tries to discover the truth about his nephew's eccentric behaviour by subjecting him to two tests. First an interview is arranged between him and 'a fair woman' who has been brought up with him from childhood. Warned by a foster-brother who is devoted to him, Amleth foils the King. Then a friend of Fengon, 'fuller of assurance than of wisdom', offers to spy upon Amleth when he is 'closeted alone with his mother in her chamber.' The proposed interview takes place, but Amleth is suspicious, and discovering the eaves-dropper beneath the straw of the bed, kills him immediately with his sword. After disposing of the remains of the unfortunate spy in a rather ghastly manner, he returns to upbraid his mother as the 'most infamous of women' for her lechery and incest. He bids her not to grieve over his madness, but rather 'to weep for the blemish in her own mind'. He thus 'rends the heart of his mother and redeems her to walk in ways of virtue: teaching her to set the fires of the past above the seduction of the present'.

Fengon now decides to get rid of Amleth and despatches him to England with two attendants, bearing *rune-staves* (letters carved on wood) 'enjoining the King of Britons to put to death the youth who was sent over to him'. But Amleth reads the instructions while his

companions sleep, alters their purport so as to shift his own doom upon them, and forges underneath the signature of his uncle. In England Amleth is received with honour and his escort put to death. He marries the King's daughter and returns to Jutland a year later, to assist as a butler at his own funeral feast. After plying Fengon and his followers generously with drink, he sets fire to the palace and burns all the drinkers within. He then rushes into his uncle's chamber and kills him after exchanging swords with him, his own weapon having been nailed fast into its sheath earlier. He then justifies his action to the people in a long speech and is hailed as successor to Fengon. After many more warlike adventures, he meets with a violent end

Here are all the essential elements of Shakespeare's plot—fratricide, incest and the antic disposition. Most of the characters too are found in the germ. There is the ghost, and there is a procrastinating hero. The anonymous decoy is the prototype of Ophelia, the unknown friend is the original of Horatio. The counsellor 'fuller of assurance than of wisdom' is a preliminary essay at Polonius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are there in the as yet unindividualised retainers who accompany the hero to England. The Craftiness of Claudius is well depicted, and even his drunkenness is indicated. At least one scene of the play—the bed-room scene—is sketched in outline, and the exchange of swords with Fengon, as described by Saxo, may have suggested the fencing match in the play. Many other episodes taking place or referred to in the play are already there in Saxo—the nunnery scene, the slaying of Polonius, the journey to England, the changeling letter, the forged signature and the doom of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. There can be little doubt that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is based

either directly or indirectly on the story given by Saxo in *Historia Danica*.

Saxo's work was first printed in 1574. In 1582, Francis de Belleforest published a free translation in French of the Hamlet story in the 'fifth volume of his *Histories Tragiques*. The hero and the temptress are here lovers: and Amleth's mother and uncle (Geruth and Fengon) were paramours even before the murder. These changes are accepted in the play. Curiously enough, however, there is no Ghost in Belleforest, and the description of the murder that he gives does not at all tally with the account in the play. Fengon in the French story did not gain his end by poison, but by a deed of bloody violence while his brother sat at dinner. It has also to be noted that the French writer does not develop some of the pregnant hints given by Saxo, which have become features of the play—the King's friend, fuller of assurance than of wisdom, and the lacerated mother, in the closet-scene, for instance. The first English translation of Belleforest's *Hamlet*, so far as is known, is the *Historie of Hamlet* published in 1608: and this bears unmistakable signs of having been influenced by the play. Polonius here hides himself behind, not the 'straw' of Saxo, or the 'counterpane' of Belleforest, but the 'arras' or 'hangings.' Hamlet's cry, in the play, of a 'rat' is also reproduced.

Saxo and Belleforest exhaust the possible sources of Shakespeare's plot, though some would add a hypothetical English translation, now lost. But Shakespeare does not seem to have been the first to dramatise the story. An earlier play, on which Shakespeare based his own—the *Ur Hamlet*, as the German critics call it—has been conjectured. Nash in his preface to Greene's *Menaphon* (1589) speaks of "whole Hamlets, I should say handfulls of Tragical speeches!" Phillip Henslowe,

manager of the Rose Theatre at Newington Butt, mentions a Hamlet play under the date June 11, 1594, Lodge in his *Wit's Miserie* (1596) refers to a 'Devil' who "looks as pale as the visard of ye Ghost, which cried so miserably at ye Theatre like an oyster wife, 'Hamlet' revenge!" The same phrase occurs in Dekker's, *Satiromatix* (1602) where Tucca says, "My name's 'Hamlet, revenge!'". In fact it appears to have become a catchword and is frequently referred to in contemporary works.

Who was the author of this Hamlet play in which a Ghost, pale and piteous, cries, "Hamlet, revenge"? It is difficult to believe that Shakespeare was the author. For one thing, the play as we have it is quite unlike what he is known to have written at the beginning of his career—*Titus Andronicus*, *Richard III*, *Henry VI*, or even *Romeo and Juliet*, and could hardly have been written by him as early as 1589. Again, Shakespeare's ghost does not cry "Hamlet, revenge!" It is quite evident that the catch-phrase must have originated with a notorious stage spook in a play which has since been lost. A close examination of Nash's allusion gives us enough material for a plausible guess.

The passage in which this reference occurs is of considerable interest to students of Elizabethan drama, but is too long to quote here. It deals ostensibly with 'trivial translators' who 'leave the trade of Noverint (a scrivener) whereto they were born and busy themselves with endeavours of art'. After exhausting Seneca they have begun to 'intermeddle with Italian translation, after the manner of the Kidde in *Aesop*, who enamoured with the Fox's new fangles, forsook all hopes of life to leap into newer occupations' If it is allowable to suppose that Nash is here attacking a single writer, though he

uses the plural, we may gather that this author was first a scrivener by profession, that he then wrote tragedies on the model of Seneca and that he finally betook himself to Italian translations. Many critics believe that the object of Nash's attack here was Kyd whose father was 'a Noverint' and who imitated Seneca and translated freely from French and Italian. This hypothesis gains added force from the fact that the simile of the 'Kiddle in Aesop', is a forced one and appears to have been dragged in as a kind of punning allusion to the dramatist's name,—a trick to which Nash was much addicted. Perhaps the device of the play within the play and the Italianate murder by poison were Kyd's own contributions.

A German play on the Hamlet theme entitled *Der Bestrafte Budermord Oder Prinz Hamlet Aus Denmark* (Fratricide Punished or Prince Hamlet of Denmark) is known to have been acted in Dresden in 1626 and is believed to date much earlier. It survives in a modernised version dated 1710. It begins with an explanatory prologue such as is affixed to Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, and exhibits on the whole a crude and melodramatic treatment of the Amleth story, such as found favour with the tough nerves of Elizabethan playgoers. In giving the name of Corambis to Polonius, it definitely links up with the First Quarto of *Hamlet*. It is generally believed that this German work gives us indications of the nature and quality of the lost play on which Shakespeare based his own.

Out of such unpromising material as this, a barbaric tale by Saxo and a 'blood and thunder' play by Kyd, Shakespeare fashioned that 'marvel of beauty and subtlety' which for three hundred years the world has been trying to understand. Montaigne's *Essays* may have coloured his thinking and Bright's *Treatise of*

Melancholy helped him to clarify his own conception of Hamlet as a study in melancholy. But, when all is said and done, the true source of the play is to be found not in this book or that, but in the measureless genius of Shakespeare.

A Critical Appreciation

No work in the whole history of English literature has provoked so much discussion as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and on none perhaps there exists such astonishing variety of opinion, ranging the whole gamut from hysterical praise to hysterical censure. It is part of the subtle fascination of the play that it should lend itself to such diverse interpretations. But it must also be admitted that much of this diversity arises from the very complicated problems that demand solution in any attempt to interpret and understand *Hamlet*. The exegesis of the text has to be faced, the main movements of the play have to be clearly envisaged on the basis of a restored text and in spite of a stage tradition that has specialised in mangling and mutilating the author's script, and above all, the working of Hamlet's mind has to be followed through the maze of his riddling speech and the unsolved mystery of his character.

Obscurity, then, is one of the main characteristics of the play, as we have it now. It is not that Shakespeare wantonly tried to mystify us or failed to understand what he was aiming at. Even Robertson who has said many hard things about *Hamlet*, admits that in the play 'there is far more evidence of superabundant power and of keen interest in the main theme than of haste or carelessness'. Nevertheless, the obscurity of *Hamlet* is a fact of quite as much importance as its marvellous attractiveness. Some clue, perhaps, as to the real significance of this obscurity may be gained when it is observed that the first faint note of bewilderment at the play was struck

by Hanmer more than a century after its publication, and that this note gained in volume and force only during the nineteenth century. The play was popular and even perhaps notorious with the Elizabethans, and there is nothing on record to show that they felt any of the difficulties that we invariably feel in a study of *Hamlet*. Waldock points out that a modern student of the play differs from an Elizabethan play-goer in two important respects. First, the story of Hamlet was a popular one in the sixteenth century. More than one dramatist must have tried his hand at it. When a play by Shakespeare on the Hamlet theme was announced, his audience knew in a general way what to expect. There was a conventional plot to which in the main features the dramatist would have to conform. The old play on the subject has now been lost and we can only guess about the outline of the crude melodrama that Shakespeare was expected to present. Secondly, some famous critical judgments on the play have become part of the popular culture of our day and stand between us and a proper appreciation of it. The Elizabethan had no Coleridge to worry over or Goethe.

Indeed, the modern attitude is best illustrated by the joke in the comic journals that Shakespeare 'revisiting the glimpses of the moon' in the twentieth century, sat for an examination in *Hamlet* and failed because he had not read Bradley. We see Shakespeare's play, not directly, but through the distorting medium of critical theories. Even before reading the play we become obsessed with the idea that Hamlet is a kind of anæmic Oxford Don, one 'who has slipped on into years of full manhood, still a haunter of the University, a student of philosophies, an amateur in art, a ponderer on things of life and death, who has never formed a resolution or executed a deed,'*

* Dowden.

and we study the play only for gathering evidence to support our preconceived theories.

The passage of time has created many other hindrances also to the understanding of the play. The English of to-day is different from the nervous speech of Shakespeare, and especially in the quibbles and witticisms of Hamlet, we find ourselves at sea, unless we press into service the erudition of Elizabethan scholars. Most of these sallies of wit might have been easily intelligible to the average play-goer then, and even the most difficult of them would not have presented perhaps more difficulties than a particularly subtle music-hall 'gag', or a brilliant repartee in a popular play to day. Then again, the pros and cons of the great controversy about ghosts, which aroused such keen interest in the spacious days of Queen Elizabeth are hardly understood even in academic circles now. The intellectual landscape has changed, and unless we care to exercise something more than that willing suspension of disbelief which is poetic faith, we are not likely to understand the position occupied by the disembodied spirit of the Royal Dane in the dramatic economy of the play.

Fencing, to take another instance, was a popular pastime in the sixteenth century: and the duel in the last scene between Hamlet and Lærtes must have been one of the highlights of the play. The manœuvre by which Hamlet seizes the poisoned foil from his treacherous opponent was evidently intended to illustrate a feat of skilled swordsmanship. But to us who live in days when fencing has only an antiquarian interest, the niceties of the combat are lost. The political situation in the play too needs a great deal of explaining, as Prof. Dover Wilson has shown. Shakespeare took many things for granted in sketching the political background of the

play and his audience would have easily dotted his *i*'s and crossed his *t*'s. But dynastic succession plays a minor role in modern politics, and we miss the significance which most students of the play till the end of the 18th century attached to the accession of Claudius. It was in their view a clear case of usurpation. Once it is understood that Hamlet is a dispossessed heir, deprived of his rightful inheritance by a crafty usurper, many obscure features in the contest between uncle and nephew become clear.

Even when all these obstacles to a proper understanding of the play are overcome, we have ample material for a case against *Hamlet*. The prosecution has to rely mainly on allegations of 'artistic ineptitude' in the delineation of the character of Hamlet. Reserving these for later consideration, we may now proceed to take up other minor points in the indictment. The stage directions, to begin with, are defective in vital places, as in the Nunnery scene and the Play-scene. We are left in doubt as to what exactly takes place at important moments in the play. Does the King see the dumbshow? If so, why does he not break down immediately? Does Hamlet know of the presence of eavesdroppers in the Nunnery scene? Why does he treat Ophelia as if she were a prostitute? Here are some of the questions which have to be answered before the main movement of the play becomes clear. And yet we have to seek an answer for them only through laborious and sometimes over-ingenuous inference from the text. Shakespeare wrote his play for the theatre and, doubtless, he would have given directions to the actors on these and other matters. But these directions, forming an integral part of the play, have been lost, and *Hamlet* without them is somewhat of a skeletal structure, waiting to be vivified by the inspired guesses of actors and producers.

A number of inconsistencies have also been noticed in characterisation. Polonius, it has been suggested, is not the same figure throughout. He makes a better impression when dispensing advice to Lærtes than later on. Horatio, again, plays two roles. At one time he knows the secret springs of politics in Denmark, at another he is strangely ignorant of common Danish customs. Even the King is a lifeless puppet except at rare intervals.

There are, again, some startling improbabilities in the play. The poison which kills by being poured into the ear is a curious freak. Not less worthy of remark is the peculiar behaviour of the people of Denmark who seemed to have silently acquiesced in the disinheritance of Hamlet, but rose in revolt on behalf of Lærtes. In fact, no serious attempt is made to explain how Claudius succeeded in ousting the legitimate heir from the throne. To take another instance, it is a surprising coincidence that Lærtes should have poison ready at hand for anointing his foil. Hamlet's return to Denmark, again, is due to a series of unbelievable accidents. The doom of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is brought about by the chance of Hamlet being in possession at the right moment of his father's signet ring. The long arm of coincidence is stretched farthest in the repertoire of the touring players containing a play which parallels the King's crime. So curious indeed did the fact seem to Dr. Grigg that he has reared a whole theory of *Hamlet* on it*.

* Dr. Gregg argues that since Claudius was put out only by the play and not by the dumb-show, he was no murderer. His discomfiture was caused by the outrageous references to second marriage in the Gonzago interlude. The Ghost is a hallucination of Hamlet and probably the whole idea of murder arose in his morbid mind by a recollection of the subconscious impressions left on him by a former presentation of the *Murder of Gonzago*.

Yet another example of the 'scandalous ineptitude with which Shakespeare has been charged in working out the plot as plot, may be found in the numerous lacunæ which leave us guessing. What, one may ask, has Hamlet been doing between the Ghost's revelation and the play-scene? How does he come to know of his uncle's intention to send him to England? How does his harangue to his mother affect her attitude to her husband? Here are a few matters needing explanation. While there are thus gaps left about here and there, we have also several unnecessary digressions—Hamlet's talk about the 'little eyases,' his advice to actors, the King's reference to the equestrian skill of Lombard, etc. The stage, it may be added, has never taken kindly to the Fortinbras episodes, the departure and arrival of ambassadors, and Polonius' talk with Reynaldo.

All these are, however, minor blemishes when compared with the major charge—which we may now proceed to consider—of failure in the portrayal of the hero. The question of Hamlet's delay was first raised by Hanmer in the beginning of the eighteenth century and has since furnished an inexhaustible theme for the critics to try their wits on. But in recent years, with the rise of the so-called historical school of criticism, the question is changed. It is no longer "What is wrong with Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark?" but rather, "What is wrong with *Hamlet*, the play?" It has been argued that Shakespeare, in revising an old play, tried to squeeze out of it significances it could not bear, and the result is the puzzle which has left the world wondering for two hundred years and more. Robertson makes the point clear. Even Shakespeare, he says, could not make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. A supersubtle Elizabethan could not make an intelligible hero for a barbaric melodrama of revenge. Following Robertson and improving

on him, Elliot stigmatises the play as 'an artistic failure'. Shakespeare, he suggests, wished to deal in the play with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, but was unable to impose this theme on the intractable material of the old play.

Arguments like these however, are apt to ignore the fact that Shakespeare wrote for the theatre and not for the study. And the character of Hamlet has stood the test of the stage for three centuries. We get the general impression of a great and tortured spirit, 'tottering beneath a tragic burden, too heavy even for his mighty back' and that is sufficient for the purposes of the tragedy. Whether this effect is wrought by the subtle study of human nature, or, as Dover Wilson has argued, by a dramatic artifice which combines psychological contradiction with suggestions of over whelming humanity, is immaterial.

The theory of the intractability of the plot is an all-comprehensive one. It can account not merely for Hamlet's delay but also for whatever puzzles or irritates us in the play. All the minor counts in the indictment enumerated above become survivals from the *Ur-Hamlet*, allowed to remain out of the poet's carelessness or want of skill or by reason of the necessity to tickle the ears of the groundlings. Yet surely whatever explanation this theory may offer for the genesis of the play's imperfections, it cannot justify them. If, in his revised version, Shakespeare allowed these things to remain, he cannot be absolved of all responsibility for them. In any final aesthetic judgment of the play, we must take it as it is, and appraise it by the general impression that it makes on us. A knowledge of the historic environment in which a play was produced may help us to understand it. But if a play can be understood only in the light of its historic environment, so much the worse for it. Clearly then,

it is a play for an age and not for all time. Because the Elizabethans relished the Hamlet story and delighted in the ghost, the antic disposition and the unaccountable delay, there is no reason why we should do so. We cannot shirk the task of evaluating *Hamlet* by the impression that it makes on us

Such an evaluation involves the consideration of Shakespeare's artistic intentions, as may be gathered from the work, of the success with which these intentions have been pursued, and of the ultimate value of the intentions themselves. The insight of proverbial wisdom in equating *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark with something devoid of its point may give us a hint about the pattern of the play. The hero of *Hamlet* is its protagonist in more senses than one. Round him, as the planets round the sun, the other characters revolve. They live only in relation to him, and in a strictly dramatic sense, they have no independent existence. "The unmistakable tone" of the play is due to its hero, or more particularly to a morbid state of the mind of the hero. His 'sore distraction' is the keynote of the dramatic symphony. And this is brought about by a shock which brings him near the brink of insanity. Hamlet's reactions to the crime of his uncle, and more particularly, the frailty of his mother, give us some idea of his moral sensibility. As Clutton Brock points out, it is not any weakness or moral defect in Hamlet that is the cause of his downfall. The very nobility of his soul unhinges his mind. 'A nature morally blunter,' writes Bradley, "would have felt even so dreadful a revelation less keenly. A slower and more limited and positive mind might not have extended so widely through its world the disgust and disbelief that have entered it". In short, the tragedy of Hamlet consists in this, that his highest endowments, 'his moral sensibility and his genius', become his enemies in his affliction.

Shakespeare was so absorbed in the presentation of this theme that he neglected many things which strike a closet critic. He took the political and tragic situation for granted; he had no time to expend over minor felicities. He came near to the heart of his age in dealing with the Ghost, and so refrained like a good dramatist from dilating on the obvious. Inconsistencies in characterisation he might have left here and there unresolved. They were matters of minor importance, and anyway, he did not expect the play to be subjected to microscopic scrutiny. Horatio, for instance, is more or less a piece of dramatic machinery, combining in himself the not always congruous functions of a confidante to the hero and an expository Prologue. By a few deft touches at certain impressive situations in the play, he has been given such an overwhelming sense of reality that it was left to Bradby to discover the flaw in his make-up.

All the characters suffer by the intense absorption of the author in his theme. They are sketched more or less from the point of view of Hamlet, and they tend to remain always in the background. The King comes to life, it may be noted, only when Hamlet is away. Even certain aspects of Hamlet, which do not contribute to the main theme, are left in mystery. The riddle of Hamlet's relations with Ophelia owes its origin perhaps to this. The same explanation may hold good in the case of the various improbabilities noticed. Besides, they do not obtrude themselves on the stage. For Shakespeare, it must be admitted, has undoubtedly tried, though perhaps a little hurriedly, to gloss them over. Hamlet's disinheritorship, for example, is given some plausibility by the vague hint of some legal quibble in the King's reference to Gertrude as the "imperial jointress to this warlike state".

As for the Gonzago play, Shakespeare takes care to give us preliminary indications that the play was like and yet unlike the Crime of Claudius. When the play is actually presented before the Court, it turns out that its plot reproduces in detail the murder of the late King of Denmark, with the only difference, that while Claudius is the brother of his victim, the murderer in the play is nephew to the Duke. But we are never allowed to notice the surprising similarity between the crimes of Claudius and Lucianus in the melodrama and sensation of the play-scene. To unnecessary digression, however, Shakespeare must plead guilty. The reference to the War of Theatres, to cite an example, is dramatically unjustifiable, but the Bard of Avon was never above stopping the action of a play for dealing with what interested him. The loss of stage-directions undoubtedly constitutes a serious difficulty, and we can only deplore that Shakespeare did not anticipate Shaw in giving us exhaustive indications of the way in which he wished the actors to play on the stage. Shakespeare's mind perhaps was so full of his subject that he did not realise what riddles the play might present, when the bare text alone was studied.

When all this is admitted, what have we against the play? A case in which the prosecution scores on the minor counts, but fails in the major issue. Critics and philosophers apart, *Hamlet* has always satisfied playgoers. It has much in it which pleases not merely the wise, but the average playgoer as well. There is a rattling good story, full of variety and action, plot and counterplot, murder and accident and sudden death. And subduing all this, there is a tremendous psychological study of a genius in difficulties. The play has to be judged ultimately, let us repeat, by the impression that it leaves on us, and critics notwithstanding, the impression that we gain is that the play is the exalting history of a heroic

figure, battling against terrific odds. "All that humanity is and all that humanity may be is pictured in Hamlet." And in 'his dripped faith and enfranchised reason', we see the disease of modern life with its sick hurry and divided arms, standing between two worlds, 'one dead, the other powerless to be born'. And in his struggle and fall, we glimpse something of the power of the spirit that has made man the conqueror of the universe in spite of his mortality.

HAMLET

EXPOSITORY ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY SCENE BY SCENE.

Act I Scene 1

The play opens in an atmosphere of mystery and awe. It is midnight and "bitter cold". Before the castle at Elsinore, Francisco, a sentry, is keeping watch. There is dead silence all around—"not a mouse stirring". To relieve Francisco, Bernardo approaches with faltering steps. He is apparently not sure that it is Francisco who is standing in the darkness. And so the challenge comes from relieving sentry—"Who's there?" The reason for this curious behaviour on the part of Bernardo soon becomes plain. He is in an apprehensive mood and has no desire to be left alone. He requests his departing comrade to hasten Marcellus and Horatio "his rivals in the watch", if he meets them on the way

Before Francisco however actually departs, Bernardo's anxiously expected friends arrive, and in the ensuing conversation it becomes apparent that the sentinels on duty have been seeing a fearful apparition for two nights past. Horatio is sceptical, but Bernardo and Marcellus vouch for the vision and begin to relate their experiences in circumstantial detail, when suddenly they all see the figure of the late King of Denmark, clad in a coat of mail, approaching them "with martial stalk". Horatio, the scholar, conjures the ghost to speak, but it "stalks away"

Doubts are at an end, and scepticism is laid to rest. But discussion ensues about the significance to be attached to the appearance of the apparition. Horatio thinks that this 'bodies some strange eruption to the state'. Marcellus is troubled about the warlike preparations, 'the post-haste and romage in the land'. There are rumours, Horatio explains, of an impending invasion by Prince Fortinbras of Norway to recover certain lands lost by his father to Denmark. He called to mind the portents that preceded the death of Cæsar and fears a calamity of equal magnitude in Denmark.

But his reflections are cut short by the re-appearance of the ghost. Once again he appeals to the apparition to speak, but it is now dawn and the cock crows. And the 'extravagant and erring spirit', who had perhaps some intention of speaking, vanishes once again in spite of the show of violence offered by Bernardo. Probably, as Horatio suggests, the ghost had to obey the law that the spirits shall not stir abroad in daylight. The time has now come for the sentinels to break up the watch, and Horatio proposes that a report should be made to young Hamlet of the night's occurrence. (The foundation is thus laid for Hamlet's meeting with the ghost in Act I, scenes 4 & 5. With this the scene ends.

Every play is something like a cross-section of life. It narrates the story of its characters from a specified point in time to another specified point. It has to exclude what has gone before and what will come after. At the beginning of a play, the playwright has to put us in possession of the initial dramatic situation, relating as much of the plot as is necessary. This is always a more or less tedious business, and hence the classical dictum of beginning the work *in medias res*, at some exciting moment, is often followed. Once the playgoers' attention is caught,

the dramatist can relieve the tension and descend to a mere recital of facts.

Shakespeare displays admirable art in the opening scene of *Hamlet*. The setting is impressive—the ramparts of a castle in a dark, silent, star-lit night, with gaunt towers and battlements in the background. The sentries on duty are nervous and apprehensive, and very soon an apparition from beyond the grave enters the scene. With marvellous economy of means, Shakespeare creates the necessary atmosphere, and from the rise of the curtain, the attention of the audience is riveted on the stage. In brief intervals of low tension, the political situation in Denmark is explained. And the scene ends on a note of suspense and expectancy. What does the appearance of the ghost portend? How will Hamlet receive the news?

Act I Scene 2

In the morning after the last scene, King Claudius holds his court at the castle. He announces, with an apologetic air, his marriage with Queen Gertrude, the widow of his late brother—"our sometime sister, now our queen"—and refers to the approval given by his counsellors to this wedding. Then he discusses the threat of invasion by young Fortinbras and directs two courtiers, Cornelius and Voltimand, to take a message to the old and bed-ridden King of Norway, uncle of Fortinbras.

After they take their leave, Claudius turns to Læertes, son of his minister Polonius, and graciously asks him what his suit is. He adds that any favour that may be required by Læertes will be given without even his asking, in view of the obligation that he (Claudius) owes to Polonius.

Lærtès begs leave to return to France, and the King, after ascertaining that the reluctant consent of Polonius has been obtained, gives the desired permission to Lærtès.

Turning then to Hamlet, Claudius asks him the reason for his gloom. The Queen follows with a request to Hamlet to cease mourning for his father and to look on his uncle with friendly eyes. Hamlet replies bitterly that he is actuated by a grief too deep for expression and too sincere for affectation. Using the age-old argument that death is natural and inevitable, and that excessive mourning of death shows dissatisfaction with the dispensation of God, Claudius tries to console his nephew and dissuade him from his proposed 'return to school at Wittenberg'. Queen Gertrude adds her entreaties to his, and Hamlet shortly answers that he will do his best to obey her. Cutting short an interview that was perhaps as distasteful to him as to Hamlet, Claudius welcomes his nephew's answer with forced geniality and dissolves the court for the ostensible purpose of celebrating Hamlet's return to normality.

Left alone, Hamlet gives way to overwhelming dejection and grief. He regrets that religion disallows suicide and the 'too, too solid flesh' does not melt of itself. Life is weary, stale and unprofitable, and the world is full of foulness and abomination. This world-weariness and pessimism of Hamlet arise, not from any love for sentimental self-pity, but out of his shocked disgust at the re-marriage of his mother within a month of the death of his father. He is forced to think of lust as the only possible explanation for the indecent haste with which the widow became the wife once again, especially as the glaring contrast between the qualities of his father and those of his uncle presses itself on his attention. No, this cannot come to any good, he says to himself. But he cannot voice his fears or give expression to his feelings,

and under the weight of suppressed emotions, his heart may well break.

His melancholy soliloquy is interrupted by the entry of Horatio, Marcellus and Bernardo on the scene. Greetings over, Horatio, sometime fellow-student with Hamlet at Wittenberg, explains that he left the University to attend the funeral of the late King. "I think, Hamlet suggests bitterly, "it was to see my mother's wedding." Plain-speaking Horatio points out that the marriage followed hard upon the heels of the funeral so that having been present for the one, he could not help witnessing the other as well. And the young Prince concentrates the bitterness of his disenchantment in an epigram. The "baked meats" of the funeral, he says, must have furnished cold entertainment for the hymeneal feast. The talk naturally turns to the qualities of Hamlet's father; and Horatio gives Hamlet another shock by describing the apparition that he saw the previous night. Recovering from his astonishment, Hamlet questions the trio closely and learns that his father's spirit, armed from head to foot, pale of countenance and showing sorrow more than anger, had been haunting the battlements of the castle. Enjoining secrecy upon all, Hamlet bids them meet him at the sentry's post between eleven and twelve the same night.

This scene introduces most of the important characters of the play. It naturally falls into two divisions. In the first part, Claudius is the central figure, and while his precise and formal utterance proceeds at an even level, our interest is centred in the young hero standing apart, clad in mourning and grimly silent. With the departure of the King and the court, Hamlet dominates the stage and his famous soliloquy strikes the key-note of the play. Hamlet is shown in a mood of utter disgust with life, and the news of the appearance

of his father's spirit fills him with premonitions of evil. The ground is thus prepared for a proper understanding of the terrific shock which Hamlet is to sustain.

Act I Scene 3

Immediately after leaving the court, Læertes must have gone home to pack. And in this scene, we find him taking leave of his sister Ophelia. Wise in worldly wisdom beyond his years, he bids his sister be careful in receiving the court of Hamlet. The Prince's⁶ passion is probably nothing more than "the perfume and suppliance of a minute". And even if his love is true, his choice of a bride has to meet with the approval of the people and the state. So Ophelia has to be wary and to take care not to listen to his songs with "too credent" an ear. While promising to 'keep the effect of this good counsel', Ophelia slyly adds that Læertes should not forget to follow his own advice.

Polonius now arrives and bids his son make haste. And crystallising his own experience and knowledge of the world in a few choice precepts, he asks Læertes to engrave them in his memory. He must be a good listener, but chary of speech. He must act after deliberation and never impulsively. Friends must be selected with care and others kept at a proper distance. Quarrels must not be sought; but if they are forced upon one, the opposite side must be made to rue them. People take their measure of one often by the dress that one wears; and the best motto for one's sartorial fashions is "rich, not gaudy". Borrowing and lending must both be avoided. And above all, concludes Polonius with a touch that seems curiously at variance with the sententious worldliness of what has gone before, one must be true to one's self.

Reminding Ophelia of his advice, Lærtès takes leave of his father and sets out on his journey. And Polonius thereupon wishes to know what Lærtès has been talking about. A few well-chosen questions tell him that the discussion was about Hamlet. He reiterates the advice given by Lærtès. Hamlet's addresses must not be too readily entertained. In the end, Polonius plainly forbids his daughter "to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet."

Here we are introduced to the household of Polonius. The characters of the father, son and daughter, are sketched in outline. The purpose of the scene is to create the impression of a sufficient interval of time elapsing before the reappearance of the ghost in I. iv. & v Coleridge wrote "This scene must be regarded as one of Shakespeare's lyric movements in the play, and the skill with which it is interwoven with the dramatic parts is peculiarly an excellence of our poet. You experience a pause without the sensation of a stop"

Act I Scene 4

Midnight again. It is biting cold, and the moon is shining. Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus foregather on the haunted terrace before the castle. While waiting for the spirit to appear, they hear a flourish of trumpets and a cannon going off within the castle. To Horatio, who seems a stranger to Denmark by his ignorance of local customs, Hamlet explains that it is usual to fire the cannon and play the trumpet to celebrate Bacchanalian revels; and the King is evidently holding a convivial party that night. It is a custom, Hamlet continues, better discarded than kept. The Danes have become notorious for their drunkenness, and all their qualities avail not, in the estimate of the world, against this single defect. It is generally the case, he goes on to moralise,

that we fail to give due credit to a man for his undoubted merits, if he suffers from a single fault.

Hamlet's sermon is interrupted by the arrival of the ghost. In moving accents, the young Prince appeals to the apparition to disclose why it has left the peace and rest of the grave to revisit "the glimpses of the moon". The spirit does not answer, but beckons to Hamlet to accompany it to 'a more removed ground.' Horatio and Marcellus warn the Prince against acceding to the request of the ghost. This does not influence Hamlet in the least. Shaking off his friends, he quietly follows the discarnate spirit of the Royal Dane, and is in turn followed by Horatio and Marcellus, gravely anxious about what may befall him in the company of this visitor from the grave.

This scene brings us to midnight again. Hamlet's reflections on the vice of drunkenness among the Danes while waiting for the ghost to appear, show the bias of his mind towards abstract speculation and generalization. His demeanour to the ghost when he meets it and his readiness to follow it to a lonely place show his daring. The demand for a private conference by the ghost intensifies suspense and rivets attention on the ghost's revelation in the next scene.

Act I Scene 5

The ghost leads Hamlet to a secluded part of the terrace. And there, in answer to Hamlet's peremptory demand, it begins to unfold its tale. It speaks of revenge, from the beginning and after a most impressive preface, bids Hamlet avenge his father's "foul and most unnatural murder". Hamlet is stunned and shocked. The sudden

death of his father followed quickly by his mother's amazing marriage to his uncle has thrown him into a deep melancholy and almost nearly upset his estimate of men and manners. No cordiality has ever existed between himself and his uncle, but he begins to suspect foul play only after he hears of the appearance of the ghost. And even then perhaps he hardly foresees the tenor of the ghost's revelation. And so he listens, shocked and surprised, as the spirit of his father relates the story of the unnatural crime. While the Royal Dane was sleeping, as was his wont, in his orchard on an afternoon, Claudius crept near with soft and silent steps and poured the 'juice of hebenon' in his ear, and deprived him 'of life, of crown, of queen' at one stroke. And so the ghost calls upon Hamlet to take vengeance. He is however bidden not to harm his mother who is to be left to Heaven and to the admonitions of her own conscience. With a final request not to forget, the ghost fades away and leaves Hamlet alone to his none too pleasant reflections.

To the shock-stricken Prince the whole universe appears to be collapsing. In the ghastly confusion of his mind, he clings fast to the spirit's pathetic adjuration to remember, as to something secure and tangible. And like the University student that he has been he sets it down in his 'tables' that one may smile and smile and yet be a damned villain. Before he can fully recover from the effects of the shattering revelations made to him and get his thoughts into some kind of working order. Marcellus and Horatio, who have been following him, hail him. Assuming a forced exuberance of spirits, he greets them in return, and when they ask about his conference with the ghost, he puts them off with 'wild and whirling words'. He assures them that the ghost is an honest one, and binds them solemnly to secrecy in regard to what they saw and heard. His

appeals to them to preserve the secret are reinforced by the ghost who speaks startlingly from under the ground. Finally, bewailing the fate which has thrust on his shoulders the responsibility of setting right times which are 'out of joint', he leads them away from the haunted terrace.

This is more or less a continuation of the previous scene. Professor Dover Wilson suggests: "The scene takes place on the front stage - the ghost disappears down the trap, and then cries from 'under the stage'".

The ground of tragedy is now stated. There has been a foul murder, and Hamlet is bidden to avenge it. The tragic action starts from now on.

The revelation of the murder here all but unhinges Hamlet's reason. His eccentric behaviour is in part a natural reaction to a trying interview and in part a mask put on for hiding the family secret from Marcellus.

Act II Scene 1

Sometime after Læertes leaves for Paris, Polonius asks his servant Reynaldo to take some letters and money to him. He desires that Reynaldo should at the same time spy upon Læertes and learn the manner of his life, and instructs him for this purpose in a technique of detection. It is suggested that Reynaldo should approach possible friends and acquaintances of Læertes and adroitly broach the subject of the young man. Feigning distant acquaintance with Læertes or his father, Reynaldo is to insinuate that Læertes is a gay young 'spark' and given to sowing wild oats. (Of course, the reputation of Læertes is not to be seriously besmirched). And whatever carp of truth his bait of falsehood may catch, he is to bring

to Polonius. He is also to subject Lærtes to keen scrutiny and make his own observations.

Receiving these instructious, Reynaldo leaves, and Polonius finds himself face to face with an agitated Ophelia. On enquiry he learns that Hamlet had called on her a few minutes ago as she sat sewing in her closet and that his behaviour had seriously disturbed her. He was dishevelled and pale and had a look so piteous "as if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors". He seized her wrist and keeping her at arm's length gazed for a while intently on her face. And then with a deep sigh, he left her without a word, though he continued looking at her as long as she was visible.

Polonius infers that Ophelia's refusal to accept Hamlet's advances must have upset him and made him mad. Hamlet, he now realises, must have been deeply and sincerely in love with his daughter. Polonius had erred in his calculations and there is nothing that he can do now except to inform the King of the situation, however distasteful it may seem to the latter. For more harm is likely to ensue from concealing rather than revealing the state of Hamlet's feelings towards Ophelia.

Between the first and the second Acts, an interval of at least two months may be surmised. In Act I Sc. 11, Hamlet says that his father has been dead two months, and in Act III Sc. 11, Ophelia points out that the late King passed away twice two months ago. The events of Act III take place on the day following the second scene of Act II, where Hamlet says "We will hear a play to-morrow." So the interval between Acts I and II is nearly two months.

The relevance of this scene is not at first apparent. Its main object is obviously to supply some relief after the high tension of the previous scene. It also throws

some light on the character of Polonius, and shows his love of tortuous ways, and his overweening self-confidence. Mr. Granville Barker suggests that the chief purpose of this scene is to bridge two apparently contradictory conceptions of Polonius, one as a respected diplomat and the other as a man 'fuller of assurance than of wisdom' (For a discussion of this point, *vide* Character of Polonius). Incidentally the scene also makes clear how Hamlet's 'antic disposition' has impressed the people and explains some features of the riddle of Hamlet's relations with Ophelia.

Act II Scene 2

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two fellow-students of Hamlet, arrive at the court of Denmark and are welcomed by the King and Queen. Claudius explains that he has sent for them in the hope that they will be able to win the confidence of Hamlet and learn the reason for his strange behaviour. The Queen seconds his request. After they take their leave, Polonius reports the return, after a successful mission, of Voltimand and Cornelius, the ambassadors whom Claudius had sent to Norway to protest against the aggressive activities of young Fortinbras. (I. 11)

On the King congratulating him for being the bearer of good tidings, Polonius adds that he has some other news of importance to communicate and that he has in fact discovered the secret of Hamlet's madness. He promises to reveal it after the King grants audience to the waiting ambassadors. Claudius suggests that Polonius himself should invite them to the royal presence.

For a few moments after the departure of Polonius, the King and Queen remain alone and discuss the cause of Hamlet's 'distemper'. The Queen is sure that his father's death and their overhasty marriage are sufficient to account for her son's distressing condition. Their conference is interrupted by the arrival of Voltimand and Cornelius, who report that the King of Norway compelled Fortinbras to forswear all designs against Denmark, but suggested that the young man might take his 'levies' to war with Poland. For this purpose the Norwegian monarch requested formal permission from Denmark for the passage of troops, and the ambassadors had been entrusted with a diplomatic communication to that effect. The King congratulates them on their success, promises due consideration of the request from Norway, invites them to dinner that night and dismisses them, being probably anxious to hear what Polonius has to say on the cause of Hamlet's disturbing eccentricities.

And Polonius, when the opportunity comes, spreads himself out. With pompous ceremony and confident self-complacency, he declares that Hamlet has fallen in love with Ophelia and that her repulse of his advances, under paternal instructions, has mad him made. In proof of this he reads out a love-letter from Hamlet to Ophelia. And when the King asks how further and conclusive proofs of this may be obtained, Polonius suggests that they may spy upon Hamlet during an arranged interview with Ophelia. And seeing at the moment Hamlet wandering about with a book in his hand the old Chamberlain beseeches the King and Queen to go away, and advances to meet the Prince.

Then ensues a dialogue in which Hamlet talks wildly, but not without a purpose. Even Polonius feels that there is a method in his madness. Under the licence of assumed lunacy Hamlet makes derogatory references

to the old Chamberlain and once alludes to his daughter. This strengthens Polonius in the belief that unrequited love is at the root of Hamlet's malady: and anxious to contrive the means of meeting between him and Ophelia, he hastily takes leave of the Prince, who dismisses him with a muttered "These tedious old fools".

Directed by Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern now approach Hamlet and are greeted effusively. Soon however Hamlet presses them to answer the question whether or not they were sent for. Getting a reluctant affirmative from them, he proceeds to say that he can divine the reason for this call upon their services. The good King and Queen have noticed, of late, a change in his behaviour. He has lost all his mirth and he does not know why. Life has ceased to hold any interest for him. Man delights him not, nor woman either.

In that case, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern point out, Hamlet is not likely to take interest in the company of players who are about to offer him their services. This news certainly interests Hamlet, and he learns from his companions that they are famous tragedians of the city, who have been forced to become a travelling troupe under the stress of keen competition from a batch of boys, enjoying the fickle favour of the populace for sometime past.

A flourish of trumpets indicates that the arrival of the actors is imminent, and Hamlet thereupon ceremoniously shakes hands with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lest they should feel themselves indifferently treated, when he will be offering that courtesy to the members of the troupe. He adds that they are welcome to Elsinore, even though his uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived. He is but intermittently mad.

Polonius now comes again to inform Hamlet of the arrival of the players. Hamlet talks at a tangent and

manages to introduce an oblique reference to Ophelia, which confirms still further Polonius' belief in his pet theory. The players soon arrive and Hamlet welcomes them warmly, throwing off for the nonce his assumed mask of madness. He requests them to recite a passionate speech he had once heard from 'Aeneas' tale to Dido,' describing the death of Priam at the hands of Pyrrhus. By way of giving a cue to the actors, Hamlet recites a few lines in a way which appears to impress Polonius. And one of the actors takes it up and carries on till, seeing tears in his eyes at the recital of the woes of Hecuba, Polonius and Hamlet call a halt.

The Prince then sends away the Chamberlain with a request to make adequate arrangements for the players. Drawing aside one among them, he asks him to arrange for playing the *Murder of Gonzago* the next night and insert in it a speech which he will specially compose for the occasion. Then dismissing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he falls into a reverie.

He feels ashamed that he should still have done nothing to avenge his father's death, when an actor, for a fictitious Hecuba, could shed tears and show so much grief. Evidently he must be a 'pigeon-liver'd' coward whom no insult or affront, no crime or oppression can rouse to manliness. Then he consoles himself with the spirit he had seen might be devil tempting him into wrong. He must have proofs more pertinent and conclusive. And so he proposes to himself that he will arrange with the actors who had come there to play something like the murder of his father before his uncle and watch the latter's reactions. "The play is the thing to catch the conscience of the King."

The conflict between Hamlet and his uncle now advances a stage further. Three theories about his madness find expression in this scene—the Queen's

suspicion about her o'erhasty marriage, the King's hypothesis about frustrated ambition, and Polonius' inspiration about jilted love. The return of the ambassadors is another indication of the passage of time. The summoning of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is the first movement in the King's counterplot against Hamlet: and the arrival of players provides an opportunity to Hamlet for testing his doubts about the honesty of the ghost. Hamlet's remarks on drama show the fine texture of his mind.

Act III Scene 1.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report the imperfect success of their mission to the King and Queen, but point out that they had a warm reception. In answer to a suggestion from the Queen that they should 'assay him to some pastime', Rosencrantz relates the arrival of the players and mentions particularly the keen interest which Hamlet displayed in arranging a play that night. Polonius confirms this and adds that he has been beseeched to entreat Their Majesties to see the play. The King gladly assents to this, and bids Rosencrantz and Guildenstern keep to their appointed task of diverting Hamlet's mind. After they take their departure, he requests the Queen also to leave the room, as he has made arrangements, himself remaining unseen, to watch Hamlet's behaviour towards Ophelia.

On the Queen's departure, Polonius takes charge of the arrangements for the experiment. Ophelia is to seat herself in a gracious pose and pretend to be absorbed in a book of devotions which her father hands over to her. A casual remark of the old Chamberlain on pretence

stings the King to the quick and brings home to him the enormity of the pretence that he is carrying on. Hearing Hamlet's approaching footsteps, the King and Polonius withdraw themselves to their previously arranged post of observation.

The young Prince is in a state of unrelieved depression. He is debating within himself the pros and cons of suicide. Death, if it were an endless sleep terminating all the ills that flesh is heir to, is 'a consummation devoutly to be wished'. Yet it may not mean that. The dread of something after death weakens the will to suicide and makes us prefer the known ills of the world to the unknown terrors beyond the grave. The power of will pales away under the influence of speculative reflection which makes us irresolute and averse to action.

The sight of Ophelia puts an end to his gloomy reflections and he goes forward to greet her. She tries to return to him the presents he had given her on the ground that since then his love has cooled. Hamlet however takes this opportunity to vent his cynicism on her and bewilders her with a general tirade against mankind. It would be a desirable end if the human race ceased to exist. Let her not marry and bring forth sinners into the world. Rather let her renounce the world and go to a nunnery.* Or if marry she must, let her marry a fool. The arts and wiles of women only disgust him. He will have no more marriages. 'Those that are married already, all but one, shall live.' And so let her retire to a convent.

Poor Ophelia is bewildered and shocked and laments the affliction that has overtaken her lover. Meanwhile

* 'Nunnery' in Elizabethan slang meant a 'brothel', and Hamlet may well have used the word in this sense.

the King and Polonius emerge out of their hiding place. Claudius scents danger in Hamlet's attitude and scouts the idea of rejected love being at the root of his nephew's eccentricities. So he proposes to Polonius that Hamlet should be sent to England to demand the 'neglected tribute.' But the old courtier is loth to see his theory so quickly disproved. And so he suggests that after the play there should be a heart-to-heart talk between the Queen and Hamlet, at which he will play eaves-dropper: and requests that the final decision to send the Prince to England may be taken thereafter. The King gives his assent to this plan of Polonius.

A day elapses after the events of Act III. Ophelia's self-effacing weakness and the King's presence of mind are shown to advantage, in this scene. The King's decision to send Hamlet to England is another step in the counter plot against the Prince.

Act III Scene 2

The scene now shifts to a hall in the castle where Hamlet and a band of actors are assembled. The Prince speaks to them on the principles of sound acting. The end of acting being, as it were, to hold the mirror up to Nature, actors must not indulge in extravagance of any kind. They must never overstep the modesty of Nature. And he warns the clowns in particular against unworthy improvisations. The actors then depart to prepare for the play. Polonius presently arrives with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to inform Hamlet that the King and the Queen have agreed to see the play. The Prince sends them off after the actors to bid them make haste.

Hamlet then calls for Horatio and they both have a few minutes to themselves. Hamlet gives expression

to the great regard he has always entertained for his friend, who has never been passion's slave and has always taken with equal thanks both the buffets and rewards of fortune. And then he reminds Horatio of the ghost's story about his father's death. He proposes to make the players enact something like the alleged murder of his father. If the King comes well out of the ordeal, then the ghost must be an evil spirit trying to lead them astray. If however Claudius should betray an uneasy conscience, then his guilt is certain. And so he requests Horatio to observe keenly the demeanour of the King during the play. Horatio promises that nothing shall escape his observation.

The King and Queen, accompanied by Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and other nobles and courtiers, enter the auditorium to witness the play. To the King's greetings, Hamlet replies obscurely, but not without making some oblique thrusts at him. And then rejecting his mother's invitation to sit beside her, he goes and seats himself at the feet of Ophelia. When she suggests that he is merry, he replies that men have nothing else to do but to be merry. Does not his mother look cheerful with his father dead only two hours? Ophelia gently corrects him and points out that his father died four months ago. This provokes Hamlet to a cynical outburst on the short and treacherous memories of men.

The play commences with a summary in dumb-show. A King and a Queen appear on the stage, manifesting every sign of mutual affection. The King then lies down to sleep, and the Queen leaves him with reluctance. Then some one steals in upon the sleeping King, removes his crown, kisses it, pours poison in his ears and beats a hasty retreat. The Queen then returns and makes a great show of lamentation. The poisoner comes back after a while, joins her at first in her mourning and then begins to woo

her with gifts. His suit succeeds very soon, and they retire from the stage as a pair of lovers.

Claudius and Gertrude do not appear to have noticed the dumb-show. Perhaps they are engaged in whispering confidentially to each other, while the show is going on.

The play now commences in real earnest. A King and a Queen enter the stage. The King recalls the thirty years of happy married life he has led with the Queen who expresses the wish that another similar period of bliss may be vouchsafed to them. She is, however, anxious about her husband's health, and he confirms her fears by stating that he has not long to live. He trusts that she will find after his death a second husband who will prove as loving as he had been. She protests volubly that she will under no circumstances marry for a second time. The King, grown grey in worldly wisdom, gently contradicts her. Our loves change with our fortunes, and even the most loving wife finds comfort in a second husband after she attains the state of widowhood. This statement of the King only incites the Queen to frenzied protestations of eternal constancy. He is, however, drowsy and soon falls asleep, and the Queen leaves him with yet another declaration of her imperishable love for him. The King's nephew then enters the scene and pours deadly poison in the ears of his sleeping uncle.

Claudius, at this point, loses his self-possession. Pale, and shaken to the depths of his being, he abruptly leaves the auditorium and orders the actor to stop forthwith. Hamlet is greatly excited and exchanges impressions with Horatio. He concludes that he is prepared to take the ghost's word for a thousand pounds. Perhaps with the object of hiding his excitement, perhaps with a view to celebrate the success of his plan to catch the conscience of the King, Hamlet calls for some music.

Meanwhile, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who had departed with the King, return to apprise Hamlet of the King's anger and displeasure. They also convey a message to Hamlet from his mother, requesting him to visit her before he retires for the night. He assents to this. Then they press him to reveal to them the secret of his eccentric behaviour. Hamlet puts them off with the suggestion that his worldly prospects are poor.

By this time the players arrive with flutes and Hamlet asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to leave him. They prefer, however, to remain and to hold still further parley with him. The Prince is annoyed and tells them pointedly that while they cannot even play on a flute, it would be absurd to expect to play on him. Polonius now arrives to repeat the message from the Queen. Hamlet in answer points to a cloud and describes its shape in various contradictory ways. Polonius agrees with him every time. Hamlet then says that he will visit his mother by and by, and dismisses all who are with him. Then, fortifying himself for the disagreeable task he has on hand, of reprimanding his mother, he leaves the palace theatre.

Hamlet's remarks on acting constitute, according to Coleridge, 'one of the happiest instances of Shakespeare's power of diversifying the scene while he is carrying on the plot'. They relieve the tension and probably indicate that the dumb-show was a surprise forced on Hamlet.

The play within the play reveals the true character of the King. Henceforward the contest between the King and Hamlet is open.

Act III Scene 3

Claudius, evidently after hearing the reports of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about the tenor of their interview with Hamlet, decides to send them and Hamlet on some kind of mission to England. He tells them that Hamlet's lunacies spell danger to him and he cannot allow him any longer to remain near his person. They flatter him by declaiming on his importance and take leave of him for making preparations for their departure to England. Polonius now comes and tells the King that Hamlet is about to interview his mother. He adds that as per royal instructions he will hide himself behind the arras in the Queen's chamber, and overhear and report the interview. He then departs, leaving Claudius alone on the stage.

The acute emotional stress through which Claudius has passed has evidently unnerved him for the moment. He feels the need for the consolations of religion and wants to pray for forgiveness. But will his prayers avail, when he is still enjoying the fruits of his crime, when there is no heart-felt remorse for the foul murder with which he has stained his soul? But, again, of what use is the mercy of the Lord, if it is not for the forgiveness and redemption of the sinner? At any rate he will try to pray. And so he kneels down in a prayerful attitude.

Hamlet on his way to his mother sees the King engaged in prayer. He has an excellent opportunity of avenging his father's murder by assassinating the murderer. There is no one near by, and the King is not in a position to defend himself even. But he hesitates, and sheathes the drawn sword, telling himself that, if killed now, Claudius may not haply get his deserts in the hereafter. And so Hamlet passes on. Claudius, after a time, gets up, heavy of heart that while he prayed with words, his thoughts would not accompany them.

Here occurs the turning point of the action. The King's reactions to the Gonzago play show that he is guilty beyond all possibility of doubt. And the King at the same time comes to know that Hamlet knows all. It is therefore necessary for Hamlet to assassinate the King at once, both to avenge his father's death and to safeguard himself. A golden opportunity occurs immediately. Hamlet discovers the King in prayer, alone, unguarded. He lifts his hand to strike, but a doubt assails him at the last moment. Claudius is in communion with God, and, by killing him now one may send his soul to heaven. It is better to wait till he can be killed in vice and sin. And so, the dagger goes back to its sheath, and Hamlet passes on.

At this point in the play, the action reaches a crisis. From the Second Act onwards there have been, as it were, two movements in the play—one concerned with Hamlet's plot against the King and the other with the King's counter plot against Hamlet. So far, Hamlet has retained the initiative and more or less commanded the situation. Henceforward the initiative passes on to the King, and the counterplot gains in momentum.

The scene is also important for understanding Hamlet's character. Plausible excuses may be offered for Hamlet's procrastination so far, but his refusal to act here clinches the issue and makes it clear that his will to action is not like that of other men.

Act III Scene 4

Polonius goes to the Queen straight from his conference with the King and tells her that Hamlet will be meeting her presently. He asks her to tell him plainly that his pranks have been "too broad to bear with".

Before the Queen can answer Polonius, the voice of Hamlet is heard, calling his mother. And Polonius conceals himself behind the arras in a hurry.

As soon as Hamlet arrives, she begins to chide him for offending the King. This provokes Hamlet and he tells her to her face that he wishes that he were not her son. Thinking that it is futile to continue the conversation any further, the Queen makes as though she would move away, saying that she will send those to him to whose words he is likely to pay some heed. Hamlet however peremptorily bids her stay and listen, while he describes her character. Frightened, she shouts for help and Polonius from behind the arras takes up the cry. With a swift movement of his sword Hamlet runs him through.

The Queen's exclamation of horror does not affect him in the least. He coolly enquires whether the man behind the arras was Claudius. And, to her further horror, he adds that his action, any way, is not worse than that of the Queen in killing a King and marrying his brother. Presently he lifts the tapestry and discovers to his surprise that the victim of his sword-thrust was poor Polonius. Consoling himself with the reflection that Polonius met his death out of foolish intermeddling with others' affairs, he turns to the Queen and rails at her bitterly for her lack of taste and judgment in choosing Claudius as a second husband—Claudius who is like a mildewed ear blasting his wholesome brother. And, having long passed the heyday of youth, she has not even the excuse of lust. She feels hurt and shamed and begs him to speak no more. But he continues in even bitterer strain, searching through the vocabulary of vituperation for choice epithets to describe his uncle.

His essay in invective is, however, interrupted by the ghost who reminds him of his almost blunted purpose

and asks him to deal more gently with his mother. The ghost is, however, invisible to the Queen, and its words are beyond her hearing. Already agitated, she fancies that Hamlet, in his madness, is seeing some hallucination when she finds him starting, as she thinks, at vacancy and talking to himself. Hamlet, however, soon disillusion her. He has been looking, not at vacancy, but at his father's form dressed as in life. Let her not lay the flattering unction to her soul that this is due not to her sin but to his madness. He is but mad in craft. Let her repent and stay aloof from the King. And when she is blest of Heaven, he will beg her blessing. He is sorry for the death of Polonius, he continues, but is prepared to answer for it. He bids farewell to her and then, as an afterthought, expresses the hope that she will not reveal the true tenor of her conversation with him to the King. Naturally she affirms her determination not betray him to Claudius. Hamlet then tells her that he knows of the King's plan to send him to England along with the treacherous Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with a sealed message. And he can guess with what intention. But at the proper time he will have the engineer hoist with his own petard. With this ominous hint, he leaves his mother and drags the body of Polonius along with him.

Hamlet's fortunes are now clearly on the wane. He plays into the hands of the King by stabbing Polonius. The murder of Polonius makes Læertes his enemy and destroys Ophelia's sanity. The King is again master of the situation.

It has been suggested that the reappearance of the ghost indicates that the second part of the play commences.

Act IV Scene 1

The Queen hastens from her interview with Hamlet to inform the King of the death of Polonius. She makes it seem as though Hamlet did the killing in a fit of madness. The King pretends to believe her and declares that it is his love for Hamlet that has kept him so long from putting restraints upon his mad escapades. The Queen adds that Hamlet has his lucid intervals and is now repenting what he has done. The King is, however, concerned with the immediate future and he expresses the determination to hush up the scandal and to send Hamlet away from Denmark that very night. Calling for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he despatches them to find Hamlet and get the body of Polonius into the chapel. Then he goes away with the Queen, explaining the possibilities of scandal and expatiating on his dismay at the tragedy.

Act IV Scene 2

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet in another room in the Castle. He assumes madness and refuses to reveal to them where the body of Polonius is. In his apparently disconnected talk, there are veiled references to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sponging on the King. Hamlet gives an obscure hint that once they cease to be of any use to the King, they will be discarded. Finally he asks them to take him to the King.

Act IV Scene 3

The King, deep in thought, is regretting that he cannot bring the strong arm of the law to bear heavily

on Hamlet who is beloved of the distracted multitude, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern return from their errand and inform the King that they could not persuade Hamlet to reveal to them the place where the body of Polonius is hidden, but have brought him along with them. Questioned by the King, Hamlet continues to feign madness and plays with the grisly idea of the disposal of human remains by worms. Polonius may be in heaven, and the King may send some one there to find him out. If he is not there, the King may himself search for him in hell. If Polonius is found in neither place within a month, then the stench from his body will attract their attention as they go upstairs into the lobby. The King takes the hint and despatches some attendants there

Professing to act out of regard for Hamlet's safety, the King informs him that he has decided to send him to England immediately. Hamlet lets it out that he can guess at the true purpose behind the King's plan but accepts the suggestion and bids farewell to his mother. Quick on his heels follow Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, under instructions from the King who then reveals in a soliloquy that the sealed message sent with them is a request to the King of England to put Hamlet to death.

These three scenes form a closely linked unit and are logically related to the third Act. They show the immediate consequences of Hamlet's unfortunate slaying of Polonius. The King's victory over Hamlet seems to be complete. Instead of Hamlet killing the King it seems as though the King will kill Hamlet.

Act IV Scene 4

Fortinbras who, at the instance of Claudius, has been bidden by his uncle, the King of Norway, to divert his

expedition to Poland, arrives on the soil of Denmark. He instructs a captain in his army to proceed to the court of Claudius and crave formal permission from him for the passage of troops. Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet the Norwegian Captain "presumably on their way to the coast. On enquiry, Hamlet learns, that Fortinbras is leading the expedition against Poland and that the *causus belli* is almost wholly a question of honour. For winning a patch of ground for farming rights over which no one would pay five ducats, Fortinbras is leading his brave company. And the Poles are ready and eager, Hamlet is told, to meet them in battle.

Hamlet is struck at once by the contrast between the adventurous spirit of Fortinbras and his own waverings and vacillations. Having cause and will and strength and means to carry out the duty of vengeance imposed on him, he is yet to discharge it, while twenty thousand men are ready to risk life and fortune for a fantasy and a trick of fame. True greatness consists not in taking vigorous action over every trivial matter of dispute, but in the readiness to fight for the merest trifle, when honour is at stake. In the murder of his father and the degradation of his mother, has he not cause enough to stir him to prompt and decisive action? His thoughts must hereafter, Hamlet decides, concentrate ceaselessly on sanguinary revenge.

Here, as in Act I, Scene 3, the action pauses. And for this reason, the First Folio omits this scene. It is of importance only as throwing further light on Hamlet's character by contrasting it vividly with that of Fortinbras.

Act IV Scene 5

A gentleman in attendance persuades the Queen to see Ophelia who has gone mad. The poor girl sings snatches of songs and talks at random, but through it all there runs a note of inconsolable grief at the sudden death of her father. The King, who comes to visit the Queen, also observes Ophelia's pathetic prattle and is visibly moved. He despatches Horatio to follow Ophelia and keep guard over her, when she leaves the royal presence, and then talks sententiously about sorrows coming, not as single spies, but in battalions. He enumerates the series of untoward events that have upset him—the death of Polonius, the exile of Hamlet, unrest among the people and the ominous activities of Læertes, who has returned in secret from France and is trying to stir up trouble.

At this point the King's reflections suffer a rude interruption from a violent commotion in the immediate neighbourhood. A gentleman in attendance rushes in to inform the King that Læertes, at the head of a violent mob which calls him king, has broken into the palace and is heading straight to attack him. Even as he finishes speaking, Læertes runs in with a drawn sword. He asks his followers to stay outside and calls on the King to answer for the death of Polonius. The King requests him to be calm and the Queen clings to him. Ophelia's arrival on the scene excites Læertes still further. The King averts the threat of immediate violence by a solemn declaration of his innocence and an offer to place all the facts concerning the death of Polonius before Læertes and a few of his select friends.

A considerable lapse of time must be supposed to intervene between this scene and the preceding one. Læertes has had time to hear of his father's death and return to Denmark, and Ophelia to brood on her misfortunes and go mad. The return of Læertes, though

it causes some embarrassment to the King, ultimately strengthens the latter's movement against Hamlet. In this scene, however, Læertes is against the King.

Act IV Scene 6

Some sailors present a letter from Hamlet to Horatio. The Prince informs him that his ship was attacked by some pirates. When in the course of the fight he boarded the enemies' vessel, his own got clear and went on its way. Thus he became a prisoner of the pirates, (who however proved merciful), while Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern and others pursued their journey to England. Hamlet adds that he has sent some letters to the King and requests Horatio to provide the sailors with some means of access to the royal presence. Thereafter he is to follow the sailors back to where Hamlet is and hear some tidings of importance.

A glimpse is here given of Hamlet's movements after his departure from Elsinore. Escaping from the King's trap, he has returned to Denmark. The scene serves the purpose of reminding us that all is not yet lost with Hamlet. At the same time it gives time to Claudius to convince Læertes that he is innocent of the death of Polonius.

Act IV Scene 7

The King and Læertes are engaged in earnest conversation. Læertes is now convinced that his father's death was due to Hamlet. He has been further told that Hamlet has plotted against Claudius also. Naturally, he asks why, under the circumstances, Claudius has dealt

so gently with his hephew. The King explains that he is in love with his Queen and that Hamlet is the apple of her eye. Moreover, Hamlet is exceedingly popular, and any attempt to deal harshly with him may recoil on the King himself. Yet Lærtès observes, through this same Hamlet has his father been lost and his sister become insane. But he will have his revenge, sooner or latter,

The King then proceeds to hint that he has not been so inactive and weak as Lærtès thinks, when a messenger brings a letter from Hamlet stating that he has been 'set naked' in Denmark and that he will explain in person the cause for his unexpected return next day. The King is upset at his plans for the disposal of Hamlet having miscarried in this fashion, but, being a man of resource, soon hits upon another diabolical scheme. He tells Lærtès that desires must be immediately translated into action; otherwise, they are apt to grow weak and accidents may intervene. When too late we feel remorsefully that we ought to have acted in time, our acknowledgment of our remissness hurts while it eases. And so Lærtès must act and act quickly.

Then the King unfolds his plot. He first recounts the praises that he has heard of the Lærtès' skill in fencing, especially from a Norman of the name of Lamond. Then he suggests that Lærtès and Hamlet, who has been envious of the other's fame, should have a friendly fencing match, in the course of which a thrust, through seeming accident, by a sword 'unbated' will see Polonius satisfactorily avenged. Lærtès proves himself an apt pupil of the scheming Claudius by adding that he will smear the point of his sword with a deadly poison, so that the merest scratch will bring about Hamlet's death. Then as a second string to his bow, the King suggests a cup of poisoned wine to be offered to Hamlet

at the conclusion of the duel if he should come out of it unscathed.

As the two conspirators are thus scheming to bring about the death of Hamlet, the Queen enters to announce the death of Ophelia. The poor girl fell 'into a brook apparently from a willow that grew aslant the stream'. Lærtès, despite his efforts to control himself, bursts into tears and goes away as much in anger as in sorrow. And the King hypocritically remarks to the Queen that his efforts to soften Lærtès' anger against Hamlet have suffered a set-back by the death of Ophelia.

Lærtès now joins forces with the King against Hamlet. A diabolical plot is hatched. The question now is: Will Hamlet fall a victim to this plot or will he outwit the King at the end?

Act V Scene 1

Two grave-diggers are preparing a grave. Between themselves they discuss with mordant humour the question whether Christian burial should be allowed for the lady whose grave they are digging. She was, one of them contends, a suicide and ought not to be buried in sanctified ground. But she was also a woman of high estate, and the influence and prestige of her family secured her what a fellow Christian of a different social status could not have obtained—a grave in the churchyard.

Next there is a facetious debate over the meaning of the word 'gentleman'. A gentleman is one who bears arms: and gardeners, ditchers, and grave-markers are by this definition gentlemen, since they all bear arms. And what is more, they follow the profession of Adam who is related in the Scriptures to have dug and who must

therefore have borne arms, and in consequence must have been a gentleman. One of the grave-diggers then propounds the riddle: who is he that builds stronger than the mason, the ship-wright or the carpenter? The answer of gallows-maker is suggested, but is ridiculed. The questioner then gives the solution, grave-digger, and asks his comrade to fetch him a stoup of wine.

Left alone, he carries on the work singing lustily. And while he is thus engaged, Hamlet and Horatio come upon him. Hamlet is evidently just returning to Elsinore from the coast. The buoyant spirits of the grave-digger jar on Hamlet's sensitive nature. Horatio tells him that as the preparation of graves is the daily work of the grave-digger, he cannot be expected to retain a sense of the solemnity of death.

The scene impresses Hamlet with an overwhelming sense of the futility of life. As the grave-digger turns up skull after skull, Hamlet speculates on the lives of those who have been reduced to this condition. One might have been a politician, another a mincing courtier, and a third perchance a lawyer. Their vanities and conceits, their petty ambitions and aspirations, and their quiddities and quillets have all become as dust.

Reflecting thus that life in its ultimate purpose is futile and meaningless, Hamlet enquires of the grave-digger whose grave he is digging. He answers wittily and makes Hamlet understand that it is a woman's grave that is being dug. In the ensuing conversation, the Prince learns that the grave-digger joined his profession on the day on which young Hamlet was born and that he has been at it, man and boy, for thirty years. Pointing out a skull, the grave-digger explains that it belonged to Yorick, the King's jester, and that it had lain in the ground for three and twenty years. Hamlet remembers Yorick very clearly indeed. Yorick had borne him

upon his back thousand times. And in the gaping cavity which is now the mouth of the skull hung the lips he had kissed so often. Even Alexander must return to dust. The moral of it all is:

Imperial Cæsar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away
O, that that earth, which kept the world in awe,
Should patch a wall to expel the winter's flaw!

Presently Hamlet and Horatio hear the funeral procession approach and retire to a corner to watch the proceedings. Ophelia's coffin is borne to the grave in the presence of the whole court, including the King and the Queen. Lærtès has a short altercation with the officiating priest on the summary nature of the funeral rites, but the priest declares that the Church has gone as far as it can in the case of a suicide.

It is during the course of this controversy that Hamlet understands the funeral to be Ophelia's. And when Lærtès jumps into his sister's grave and extravagantly calls for earth to be heaped over both himself and his sister, Hamlet feels annoyed and jumps into the grave alongside of Lærtès. There is a short scuffle between the two, but they are separated. Hamlet explains that he loved Ophelia and that forty thousand brothers cannot equal him in his love. Lærtès is evidently even more angry than Hamlet, but the Queen tries to soothe him by pointing out that Hamlet is mad. The King adroitly reminds him of their conference the previous night, and directs Horatio to watch over Hamlet. The gathering then disperses.

This scene may be supposed to take place on the day following the events of IV vii ("To-morrow do I beg leave to see your kingly eyes" IV vii 44). The

grave-diggers lighten the tension of the previous scene with their jests and carry on the action till Hamlet and Horatio meet the funeral procession of Ophelia. Hamlet's conversation with the grave-diggers shows that there are signs of returning normality in him.

Act V Scene 2

Some time after the incident at the grave-yard, Hamlet recounts to Horatio a discovery he had made of the King's treachery. Forgetting good manners, he had stolen one night his uncle's epistle to the King of England from the sleeping Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Therein Claudius had requested the English King to kill Hamlet without delay. On the spur of the moment Hamlet devised a plan to escape the fate that threatened him in England. He wrote another letter asking the King of England to put Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death, and sealed it with his father's signet ring. This letter it was that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were conveying to England. Their deaths, Hamlet adds, do not trouble his conscience; for, intermeddling in a quarrel between people of high estate can lead only to such an end.

Hamlet then expresses his determination to kill the King forthwith—at any rate before the news from England arrives. He then adds that he was sorry for the scuffle with Læertes. He was provoked by Læertes's ostentatious display of grief, as if he alone sorrowed at the death of Ophelia. Læertes, he can now understand, had ample excuse to entertain bitter feelings towards him: for, was not he responsible for the death of Polonius and the tragic fate of Ophelia? And had he

not enough experience to know how such a situation affects the mind? All that he can do is to court the favour of Lærtès and try to win his friendship.

This *tete-a-tete* is interrupted by the arrival of Osric, a young gentleman attached to the court of the King. Speaking in an affected jargon and suffering in consequence ridicule at the hands of Hamlet, Osric delivers a message from the King. Will Hamlet agree to meet Lærtès in a friendly fencing match? The King, it appears, has wagered Lærtès that Hamlet can secure nine hits before his opponent can secure twelve. Hamlet agrees, and, after Osric takes his leave, the two make fun of him for his attempt to assume the manners of a finished courtier.

A lord in attendance on the King then reports that everything is ready for the fencing match and that the King and the Queen are coming to witness the contest. The Queen, he adds, specially requested Hamlet to make some friendly advances to Lærtès before the combat began. On his departure, Horatio expresses doubts as to the outcome of the match. Hamlet, however, is confident of his skill, though he has a presentiment of evil. And despite Horatio's protests, he decides to ignore it

The fencing match then commences before the King and the Queen and the whole court. At the outset, Hamlet explains to Lærtès that he killed Polonius in a fit of madness and expresses his sincere sorrow therefor. Lærtès says that he accepts this explanation, but whether it will meet with the requirements of the prevailing code of honour he must leave it to those who are competent to judge. Hamlet succeeds in securing three hits very soon, and the Queen in her joy drinks the cup of poisoned wine which the King had been offering for some time to Hamlet. Immediately Lærtès wounds

Hamlet and in a short scuffle, there is an exchange of rapiers, and Læertes is wounded in turn by his own poisoned sword.

The Queen meanwhile is feeling the effects of the poison and dies with a declaration that she had been poisoned. Læertes too is by this time suffering from the the potent venom he had intended for Hamlet, and he explains briefly that Hamlet's death also is imminent in consequence of his having been wounded by the envenomed sword. Læertes succinctly lays all the blame on the King.

In a flash Hamlet realises the gravity of the situation and stabs the King to death. To make assurance doubly sure, he also pours what remains of the poisoned draught down the throat of Claudius. He then requests Horatio not to try to follow him beyond the grave, but to draw his breath for a while in pain, in order that the world may receive a true explanation of the tragedy. A volley of cannon shots is then heard and Hamlet is informed of the arrival of Fortinbras from Poland and the ambassadors from England. Hamlet's end is drawing near, and he realises he cannot live to see them. But he charges Horatio to inform the people that he wishes that Fortinbras should succeed to the throne of Denmark. The fell sergeant, death, then makes his strict arrest, and Hamlet's truly tragic career reaches its fatal end.

Fortinbras and the ambassadors from England then arrive on the ghastly scene, more resembling a battlefield, with the dead strewn about, than a royal court in time of peace. Horatio then offers to explain the entire sequence of events that terminated in this holocaust, and Fortinbras orders a funeral with military honours for Hamlet. The play ends with a dead march and a peal of cannon shots, as the dead are carried off.

HAMLET

In this scene, the plot against Hamlet thickens, and Osric supplies a last opportunity for Hamlet's display of wit. The poisoned foil kills Hamlet, but the King and Lærtès receive their meed, and Gertrude dies as a result of accidentally drinking off the poisoned wine intended for Hamlet.

Fortinbras arrives after the catastrophe to carry on the action indefinitely further and to give the impression that the play is a mere segment of life.

ANNOTATIONS.

N. B.—The line numbering relates to Verity's Edition of the Play

1. Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio

I i. 42.

Marcellus asks Horatio to speak to the ghost when it appears for the first time in the play. The reason why Marcellus himself does not speak, but asks Horatio to do so, is that Horatio is a 'scholar'. Two beliefs of the Elizabethans about ghosts are here referred to, either explicitly or implicitly. In the first place, ghosts could not of themselves speak to men: they must first be spoken to. Secondly, scholarship in Latin provided one with formulas of exorcism, and only those armed with these could safely venture to hold intercourse with ghosts.

2. So frown'd he once when, in an angry parle,
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice

I. i. 62-63.

At the request of Maacellus and Bernardo, Horatio keeps company with them on the battlements of the castle at Elsinore in order to observe for himself whether there is any truth in their story of an apparition haunting the place. He is at first sceptical, but the sensible and true avouch of his eyes converts him.' The ghost appears for a moment before their amazed eyes and walks away. And while Horatio remains still stunned, Marcellus asks him whether it was not like the King. Horatio replies in the affirmative. Such was the armour the King had on when he fought with Norway: so did he frown when after breaking up in anger a conference with the Poles (who travel in sledges) he fought against them in winter.

The word 'parle' is now written 'parley' and means in this context a conference for carrying on negotiations. On the exact significance of 'sledded Polacks' much has been written. The second Quarto has '*sledded pollax*' and the First Folio '*sledded Pollax*'. Malone first suggested the emendation '*Pollacks*' meaning Poles for 'pollax'. '*Sledded*' would mean in this view 'having sledges'. A different view is that a pole-axe with a hammer or sledge is to be understood. Yet another interpretation is that there is a reference to 'a leaded pole axe'. It seems on the whole best to understand the phrase as referring to the Poles owning sledges. The reading '*pole-axes*' occurs only in the Fourth Folio of 1685, and has little textual authority. It is also stated that the word '*sledge*' in the sense of 'hammer' was never known to be spelt as 'sled'. And what is most important, smiting the ice with a pole-axe is too trivial an incident to impress itself on Horatio's memory. Besides, a reference to the Poles may be naturally expected immediately after the allusion to Norway. Malone's conjecture is further supported by the reference to the Polack in Act II, Scene 2, 15 & Act IV, Scene 4, 23

- 3 Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task
 Does not divide the Sunday from the week;
 What might be toward, that this sweaty haste
 Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day:

I. i. 75-78.

After seeing the ghost, Horatio says that he is afraid that its appearance 'bodes some strange eruption to the state'. This immediately turns the conversation to the political state of Denmark. Marcellus wants to know the meaning of the warlike preparations going on in the land. He asks, among other things, why

ship-builders are forced into compulsory service of the state and constrained to work all the week, without even a weekly holiday. What is about to happen that there should be such haste and such ceaseless toil throughout the day and the night?

Shipwrights = Ship-builders

4. Now sir, young Fortinbras,
 Of unimproved mettle, hot and full,
 Hath in the skirts of Norway, here and there,
 Shark'd up a list of lawless resolute,
 For food and diet, to some enterprise
 That hath a stomach in't:

I i. 95-99.

Horatio in Scene I of the First Act, sets about explaining to Marcellus and Bernardo the reasons for the warlike preparations going on in Denmark. He recalls the ancient feud between the elder Hamlet and Fortinbras of Norway, which resulted in the latter losing some territory to the former, and goes on to state that young Fortinbras is now trying to recover the territory lost by his father. Young and of fiery and undisciplined temper, he has now in the outlying parts of Norway, gathered together indiscriminately, as a shark picks up its prey, a band of desperadoes, caring nought for law and ready to embark on any adventure with a spice of danger in it merely for getting their daily bread.

The word 'mettle' means 'temper' or 'disposition' and is now used in the phrase, 'on one's mettle.' Un-improved' may mean 'unregulated' or 'not turned to account'. The verb 'shark'd' has been coined from the noun 'shark' and is used in the sense of picking up indiscriminately, as a shark picks up its food. 'Lawless' suggests that the 'resolutes' were outlaws or at least were ready to turn outlaws. The Folio has the reading 'landless'. 'Stomach' often has the sense of courage.

In the context it obviously means spice of danger or adventure.

5. In the most high and palmy state of Rome
 A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
 The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
 Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;

I i. 113-116.

The appearance of the ghost synchronising with the warlike preparations going on in Denmark reminds Horatio of the portentous omens that preceded the death of Julius Cæsar. He says that in the great and mighty empire of Rome, sometime before the death of Cæsar, the spirits of the dead deserted the graves and walked about the streets of the capital, making strange noises.

There is ample evidence to show that Shakespeare was much impressed by Plutarch's *Lives*, which he most probably read in North's translation. Plutarch devotes attention to the omens that appeared about the time of Cæsar's assassination, and Shakespeare describes them in his *Julius Cæsar*. A passage in II. 2 of that play bears a close resemblance to Horatio's account of the same events in *Hamlet*. It has also been suggested that Shakespeare supplemented the reference in Plutarch by a study of Lucian's *Pharsalia* available in Marlowe's translation.

Another point of interest in these lines is the description of the spirits of the dead as 'squeaking and gibbering in the Roman streets.' According to classical beliefs, ghosts had a shrill, high-pitched voice. Mr Verity cites a line from the *Odyssey* which speaks of the spirits of Penelope's suitors as gibbering like bats

6. As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,
 Disasters in the sun : and the moist star,

Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands,
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse :

I. i 117-120.

These lines occur in the middle of Horatio's description of the portents that preceded the death of Julius Cæsar in *I. 1*. They occur immediately after the statement that 'the sheeted dead' squeaked and gibbered in the Roman streets.' As it stands, the sentence is incomplete, and most editors have conjectured the loss of a line or two. Prof. Dover Wilson, however, following a suggestion of Gerald Massey, has placed lines 121-125 immediately after line 116. Rearranged thus the whole passage is easily intelligible and, reads thus :

The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets ;
And even the like precurse of fierce events,
As harbingers preceding still the fates
And prologue to the omen coming on,
Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
Unto our climatures and countrymen,
As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,
Disasters in the sun, and the moist star,
Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.

Stars with trains of fires are of course comets, whose appearance has been universally regarded as an evil omen. The world 'disasters' probably stands for 'unfavourable aspects' of astrology. It has been suggested that it may mean 'sunspots'. The 'moist star' is the moon, which was believed to suck up moisture from the earth and to govern the tides of the sea.

Neptune's empire' of course is the sea. The statement that the moon was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse probably signifies that there was a prolonged and total

eclipse of the moon. The reference to doomsday alludes to the Biblical prophecy that at the second coming of Christ 'the moon shall not give light'.

These lines are omitted in the First Folio.

7. and at his warning,
 Whether in the sea or fire, in earth or air,
 The extravagant and erring spirit hies
 To his confine :

I. i- 152 155.

Horatio, Marcellus and Bernardo keep watch over the battlements at the castle at Elsinore. Marcellus and Bernardo, having seen a ghost, wish to have the benefit of Horatio's company and advice. Horatio is at first sceptical, but the 'sensible and true avouch of his eyes' convinces him in the end. For the ghost duly appears before them all twice. However they are not able to make it speak, and at cock-crow it vanishes. Horatio then points out that the spirits wandering out of their elements must get back to their prescribed confines at dawn. They may not stir abroad during daylight.

The pronoun 'his' stand for the cock. The crowing of the cock is conceived as a warning to the spirits to return 'home'. The reference to earth, air, sea and fire, in the second line glances at an old belief that each of these 'elements' had its own particular band of spirits.

The words 'extravagant' and 'erring' are used in their original etymological sense. 'Erring' here signifies 'wandering' and 'extravagant' means wandering beyond one's element, vagarant. *Hies* = Hastens. *Confine* = Place of confinement.

8. The bird of dawning singeth all night long ;

I. i. 160.

In the very first scene of the play, Marcellus and Bernardo keep watch over the battlements at the castle at Elsinore. At their request Horatio is present to investigate a ghost which had appeared twice before them. The ghost duly arrives on the scene, but before it could be made to speak, it hears the cock crow, and instantly vanishes. The talk then turns on the belief that the ghosts may not stir abroad after dawn. The crowing of the cock is like a warning call to them to get back to their confines. During the course of this discussion Marcellus refers to an exception to this rule. On the auspicious Christmas night, he says, the cock is believed to crow right through the night ; and no ghosts are allowed to wander out of their confines.

'The bird of dawning' is of course the cock, whose crowing is conceived to announce the dawn. Professor Dover Wilson points out that there seems to be some scientific authority for the phenomenon recorded by Marcellus. Towards the end of December, when nights are longest, the cock crows from the evening on. And from this observed fact, it is easy enough to pass on to a faith in the beneficent influence of the Christmas season.

9. then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor which hath power to charm ;
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.

I. i. 162-164.

The sudden exit of the the ghost in Act I, Scene 1, at cock crow stimulates a discussion among Horatio, Marcellus and Bernardo about the nocturnal habits of spectres. Horatio points out that the crowing of the cock is a summons to the wandering spirits to hurry back

to their confines. Marcellus then draws their attention to an outstanding peculiarity of the Christmas season.

During this auspicious time, discarnate spirits may not leave their places of confinement even during nights; planets cannot exert their evil influence; fairies are powerless to strike men with disease: and witches are disabled from practising sorcery. For the birth-day of Christ is so holy and so touched with heavenly grace.

The word 'strike' is used here in a peculiar, technical sense, known to students of astrology. It stands for the exercise of evil influences by planets. The expression 'moon-struck', which survives in modern English, is an instance of the use of the word 'strike' in this sense. The word 'take' means here 'to exercise pernicious supernatural influence' and consequently to 'blast with disease'. 'Charm' here stands for 'bewitch'.

- 10 Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
 The imperial jointress to this warlike state,

I. ii. 8-9.

King Claudius is making to his Privy Council the announcement of his marriage with Gertrude, the widowed queen of his brother. He describes her as formerly his sister, (that is, sister-in-law) and now his queen. He adds that she is 'the imperial jointress to this warlike state.' The word 'jointress' is a technical term in law and means a widow who retains a life-interest in the estate of her husband. Gertrude is here spoken of as an imperial jointress, a queen who holds a life-interest in the kingdom of her late husband. Professor Dover Wilson suggests that Claudius possibly ascended the throne in supersession of Hamlet by claiming as the husband of the 'imperial jointress.'

11. You cannot speak of reason to the Dane,
And lose your voice.

I. ii. 44 45.

Claudius is addressing Lærtes in the Privy Council scene. After disposing of the mission to Norway, he turns to Lærtes and asks what the favour is, which he wishes to seek. Nothing in reason will be refused to him. He cannot ask anything reasonable of the King and waste his words.

'Of reason' here means 'in reason,' 'anything reasonable.' The 'Dane' is the King of Denmark. 'Lose your voice' means 'waste your words, fail in your suit.'

12. A little more than kin and less than kind.

I. ii. 65

This is Hamlet's first utterance, in the play and it has given the editors much food for thought. The scene is the second scene of the first Act, in which Claudius meets his counsellors and announces his marriage to them. After disposing of formal state business, he turns to Lærtes and grants him leave to return to Paris. Then Hamlet's turn comes. Claudius addresses him as 'my cousin, Hamlet, and my son.' Bitterly, Hamlet comments upon this in these riddling words: "A little more than kin and less than kind." It is evident that 'kin' here is intended to echo 'cousin' in the King's speech and 'kind' here roughly corresponds to 'son'. The play on words is there, but the parallelisms must not be too closely pressed. The general sense is obvious. Hamlet's riddle may be paraphrased thus: "My kinship with you is something more than that of a cousin, since you have married my mother, but it is hardly that of a son, for your marriage with my mother is incestuous." In Elizabethan English 'kind' meant 'family', and

Shakespeare often uses it to denote the relations of children towards parents. It has also been taken by some editors to mean 'kindly', and they think that Hamlet merely states that, though he is something more than a cousin to the King, his feelings do not correspond to the intimacy of the relationship.

13. But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

I. ii. 85-86.

When the Queen in the Privy Council scene (Act I, scene 2) asks Hamlet why he still seems to look upon the death of his father with such particular concern, Hamlet retorts that there is no question of 'seeming' with him. Wearing mourning, sighing, weeping or other external marks of sorrow are but 'the trappings and the suits of woe': they may spring from real grief or be merely simulated. But he has within him something which is beyond display. His grief is too deep for any adequate external demonstration.

'Trappings' stand for ornamental appendages, especially plates of metal and other ornaments of horses. 'Suit' of course is dress.

14. It shows a will most incorrect to heaven;

I. ii. 95

Claudius is trying to console Hamlet for the death of his father. In the Privy Council, Hamlet stands out prominently by reason of his gloomy visage and the dark mourning he wears. All the courtiers are in festive dress, for while the late king is dead, the present king has ascended the throne, and has moreover married. Not an occasion for grief to any courtier who knows which side his bread is buttered. And so the 'nighted colour

of Hamlet's dress looks almost indecent in this joyous company. The King points out that death is of common and inevitable occurrence. To remain unreconciled to bereavement is to question the decrees of Providence. It shows a will which refuses to bow to the chastisement of Heaven and is unwilling to be controlled by God

'Incorrect' means literally 'uncorrected, unchecked'. Hence it came to mean also 'unsubmissive'.

15. Fie ! 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd :

I. ii 101-103.

Trying to console Hamlet for the death of his father, Claudius points out in the Privy Council scene that to grieve over-long for the death of any one near and dear to us is unnatural and impious. It is a sin against Heaven, because we are thereby questioning the wisdom of the dispensations of Providence. Even the dead may not have liked that we should suffer ourselves to be paralysed by grief at their inevitable departure. Such indulgence in sorrow is, moreover, unnatural. Finally, it is unreasonable

'Fault' may here mean 'offence'. 'To heaven' means 'against Heaven'. 'Nature' may stand for the 'natural order of things' or 'natural affections'. Perhaps the word 'absurd,' is here used in the etymological sense of 'deaf'. 'To reason most absurd' may be paraphrased as 'deaf to the voice of reason'.

- 16 O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew !
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter !

I ii 129-132.

This is one of the key-passages in the play. It is in Hamlet's first soliloquy and it gives us perhaps more insight into Hamlet's character than any other passage whatsoever. After the Privy Council disperses (Act I, Scene 2), Hamlet is left alone for a few moments. He has no longer to keep himself under control, and his long-suppressed feelings find expression at last. He is utterly disgusted with life. He exclaims: "Why should not this solid flesh melt of itself and dissolve and put an end to my unbearable existence? Or why should God have decreed against suicide? I wish, I yearn so intensely for death. Let it come of its own accord, or let me be allowed to take my own life".

There are variant readings for 'too, too solid', which is found only in the first Folio. The first Quarto has '*too much griev'd and sallied*', while the second Quarto reads '*too too sallied*'. Several editors have suggested that '*sallied*' is probably a misprint for '*sullied*' and have pointed out that this particular printer's devil was of common occurrence in Shakespeare's plays. If this emendation is accepted, the passage must be understood as emphasising Hamlet's disgust at his mother's incest. The whole of his soliloquy justifies this interpretation. Hamlet feels that, being the son of his mother, his flesh is corrupt, and therefore he wishes to do away with it.

There is no explicit prohibition in the Christian scriptures against suicide as such. The 'canon against self-slaughter' is probably in the sixth commandment: "Thou shalt not kill". Of course Christian divines have never conceded the right to suicide, and later in this play, the Church's attitude to suicide is graphically portrayed at the funeral of Ophelia.

17. Fie on't! O, fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely

I. ii 135-137

In the course of his first soliloquy in Act I, Scene 2, Hamlet gives expression to his utter disgust with life. The world seems to him a garden in which weeds are not removed and plants are allowed to run to seed. Gross and noisome weeds have overrun it and are in complete possession of it.

'Rank' means luxuriant in growth or disgusting. 'Merely' is here used in the sense of 'completely'. To run to seed—to go to waste.

18. Hyperion to a satyr:

I. ii. 140.

Hamlet, in the course of his first soliloquy in Act I, Scene 2, expresses his horror at his mother's hasty marriage with his uncle. The inevitable comparison is instituted, The elder Hamlet was to Claudius like Hyperion to a satyr. Hyperion was the Greek name for the sun-god. Strictly speaking, he was one of the Titans and father of Helion, the sun, but as Mr. Verity points out, the identification of Hyperion with the sun-god was as old as Homer. The word is evidently used here in the sense of the sun god. 'Satyr' was in Greek mythology a sylvan deity half human in form and half goat-like, with many unsavoury associations. So, while the elder Hamlet was beautiful and radiant like the sun-god, Claudius was foul and ugly like a satyr.

19. Like Niobe all tears.

I. ii 149.

Hamlet, left alone after the session of the Privy Council in Act I, Scene 2, gives somewhat incoherent expression to his sense of disillusionment and disgust. Life seems

to him futile and foul. The main cause of his agitation is his mother's shameless alliance with his uncle in marriage. When her first husband died, she seemed so sunk in sorrow. She followed the funeral procession, a very picture of grief, like Niobe re-incarnate.

The allusion is to Niobe, wife of King Amphion of Thebes, whose sons and daughters were slain by Apollo and Artemis in anger at the insult she had meted out to their mother, Leto. At her request, Zeus transformed her into a stone on the top of Mount Sipylus in Lydia. It was believed that this stone shed tears every summer.

20. the funeral baked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

I. ii 179-180.

Horatio, Marcellus and Bernardo interrupt Hamlet in the midst of his first soliloquy (Act I, Scene 2) to report to him the visits of the ghost. Greetings over, Horatio explains that he has come to Elsinore to attend the late King's funeral. Hamlet suggests that he thinks it was to see his mother's wedding. With his usual bluntness Horatio points out that the wedding followed hard on the heels of the funeral. In bitter irony, Hamlet says that the close juxtaposition of the two events was due to economy. The pastries prepared for the funeral furnished cold entertainment at the marriage dinner. The allusion is to the old custom of serving cold dishes to friends and relatives at a funeral.

21. In the dead vast and middle of the night.

I. ii. 197.

Horatio, when reporting the visits of the ghost, mentions the time of its appearance. It haunts the castle terrace at midnight, when everything seems dead.

'*Dead vast*' is the reading of the first Quarto. The second Quarto and the first Folio read '*dead waste*'. The different readings imply meanings not very dissimilar. By *dead vast*, may be understood the void still as death, silent vacancy. '*Dead waste*' implies a sense of desolation, midnight being looked upon as a silent, desolate period.

22. Give it an understanding, but no tongue :

I ii 249.

Here is a sentence which has passed into the familiar currency of the language. After listening to the reports of Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo, about the appearance of a ghost, Hamlet promises to meet them at the haunted terrace to investigate the affair. He enjoins them to strict secrecy and asks them merely to understand and never to reveal whatever may happen that night.

23. foul deeds will rise,

Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.

I. ii 256-257

These form the closing lines of Act I, Scene 2, and part of a short soliloquy of Hamlet at the end of the scene. The report about the appearance of his father's spirit, clad in armour, upset Hamlet and makes him expect that some foul game will be revealed to him. He is impatient at having to wait till midnight, but he consoles himself with thinking that sooner or later the revelation will be made. Foul deeds cannot remain hidden: they will become known to men, however securely they may seem to remain in the dark.

24. For nature, crescent, does not grow alone
In thews and bulk; but as this temple waxes,
The inward service of the mind and soul
Grows wide withal

I. iii. 11-14.

These lines are spoken by Lærtēs, when advising Ophelia not to believe in the permanence of Hamlet's passion. Hamlet is still young, Lærtēs says, and it is a fact that a man's nature, when growing, does not merely exhibit its growth in physical strength and size. But as the body develops, the mind and the soul within also progress to wider levels in the inward service they perform and embrace new spheres of interest. In other words, Hamlet, being young, now makes love to Ophelia, but soon he will outgrow that love.

'Crescent' is used in the sense of 'growing'
'Temple' is a Biblical usage for 'body'

25. The canker galls the infants of the spring
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent

I. iii. 38-41.

Lærtēs before leaving for France advises Ophelia to be cautious in receiving Hamlet's advance. (Act I, Scene 3.) Her very youth is a factor of danger. The canker-worm preys upon the flowers of spring even before their buds are fully revealed. Pestilential diseases spread their infection in the rank mists and dampness of the early morning. Even so, is our callow youth, we may be beset by dangers to our physical and moral well-being.

The term 'button' means a bud.

26. Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whiles, like a puff'd and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
And recks not his own rede.

I. iii. 46-50.

Ophelia, after listening to her brother's unsolicited advice to be careful in her dealings with Hamlet (Act I, Scene 3), makes a sly retort. Let him not be content with merely dispensing good advice: let him also follow it. There are some graceless pastors, who preach the difficult path of virtue to their congregations, but themselves follow, like reckless reprobates, the pleasant and agreeable path to damnation, disregarding their own counsel. The way to heaven is rugged and steep and thorny. That is to say, it is difficult to conquer temptation and practise righteousness. The practice of vice seems pleasant and attractive, but in the end it contrives our ruin.

The 'primrose path' is also mentioned in *Macbeth* and *All's Well That Ends Well* and may perhaps be traced to a passage in *St Matthew*.

In the middle of the sentence there is a slight change of construction. Ophelia begins with a reference to some ungracious *pastors*, but later on speaks as though she has alluded to only one *pastor*. She may have intended to continue the sentence with an address to Læertes, which is indeed what we should expect.

27 For the apparel oft proclaimeth the
 And they in France of the best rank and station
 Are most select and generous, chief in that.

I. iii. 71-73.

*Polonius, in giving advice to his son Læertes before bidding him farewell, utters these lines. He bids his son dress well, but not gaudily. For, he continues, dress is often the measure of a man. And men of high birth and rank in France are fastidious in their fashions of dress.

The third line has provided a puzzle to the editors. The Quarto gives '*Or of a most select and generous, chiefe in that*', while the First Folio reads '*Are*' for '*or*' and '*cheff*' for '*chiefe*'. Most editors adopt '*Are*' and omit the immediately following '*of a*'. This gives us of course good sense. Prof. Dover Wilson suggests the emendation '*often*' for '*of a*', and points out thht the misprint he has presumed was a printer's devil of frequent occurrence in Shakespeare's days. Another suggesion is to read '*cheefe*' or '*sheaf*' for '*chief*' and retain '*of a*', when the sense would be that the men of rank and station are of a most fastidious set in matters of dress.

28.

Tender yourself more dearly ;

Or—not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,
Running it thus—you'll tender me a fool.

I iii. 106-108,

Polonius, on hearing that Hamlet is paying court to Ophelia, warns her against encouraging him. "Put a higher value upon yourself", he says, "otherwise you will show me to the world as a fool". He is playing on the word '*tender*'. Two lines earlier, he spoke of taking '*these tenders for true pay*'. And so in a semi-apologetic vein, he says that he does not propose to run the word to death. The actual words used are '*not to crack the wind of the poor phrase*'. The metaphor is of a horse being ridden or of a hound running in pursuit, until it loses its wind. The word '*running*' continues the figure.

'Tender me a fool' may also be taken to mean 'you will show yourself a fool in my eyes'. Dowden suggests that '*fool*' may stand for a '*child*' and that Polonius insinuates that if Ophelia is not careful, she may presently bring forth a child.

'*Running*' which almost all editors adopt, is an emendation for '*wrong*' of the second Quarto and '*roaming*' of the first Folio.

29 Do not believe his vows: for they are brokers,
Not of that dye which their investments show,
But mere implorators of unholy suits,
Breathing like sanctified and pious bonds,
The better to beguile.

I iii. 126-130.

Learning that Ophelia is receiving attentions from Hamlet, Polonius warns her against believing in the Prince's words. She protests that he has sworn his love with almost all the holy vows of Heaven. Polonius retorts that Hamlet's vows should not be believed. They are like go-betweens appearing in false colours. They advocate evil causes, while they show themselves off as holy and pious bonds, the better to deceive her.

However we have, in Shakespeare's characteristic manner, a quibble on 'broker' and 'investments'. A broker may be taken to be either a commission agent or a pimp. In the one case, investments represent monetary investments, while in the other case, the word means merely vestments, dress. Theobald suggested the emendation 'bawds' for 'bonds', but there is difficulty in conceiving of a pure and sanctified bawd. Moreover, the poet's intention obviously is to contrast the real nature of Hamlet's vows, as implorators of unholy suits, with their seeming-virtuous appearance. *Bonds* may mean pledged words, more particularly bonds of matrimony. And the word was perhaps suggested by the word 'brokers' some lines above.

30. But to my mind, though I am native here
 And to the manner born, it is a custom
 More honoured in the breach than the observance.

I. iv 14.16

Horatio, Hamlet, Marcellus, and Bernardo meet on the haunted terrace to investigate the ghost. The King is a convivial party at the time and they hear peals of cannon going off. Horatio asks what this means. Hamlet replies that the King is celebrating in this manner 'the triumph of his pledge'. Then Horatio further enquires whether it is customary to celebrate thus. Hamlet answers that it is so, but adds that though he is a native of Denmark and is accustomed to the prevailing fashion by his birth, he considers it a custom the giving up of which is more honourable than its observance.

The phrase 'more honoured in the breach than in the observance' has passed into the common currency of the language though it is often used in the sense 'more neglected than practised'.

- 31 the dram of eale
 Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
 To his own scandal.

I. iv. 36 38

When Hamlet, Horatio and the two sentries meet together on the 'platform' before the castle, to observe whether the ghost comes again, they hear the King's holding wassail to the accompaniment of peals of cannon. Hamlet admits in answer to a question from Horatio that it is a Danish custom thus to celebrate convivial revelry. He then goes on to observe that the solitary vice of drunkenness has put in the shade all the virtues of the Danish people, just as a single defect generally obscures the virtues of anyone in public estimation. He finally

concludes with this somewhat cryptic sentence, which may be taken to mean roughly that the whole body of good may be degraded or destroyed by a little admixture of evil.

'*Eale*' may be a misprint for '*eule*' which may stand for '*evil*'. Elsewhere in *Hamlet*, '*devil*' appears as '*deule*'. Of the many suggested emendations, '*base*' has some plausibility. '*Of a doubt*' has provoked much editorial guessing. Of the many speculations made, the suggested reading '*often dout*' does least violence to the text. '*Often*' is frequently misprinted as '*of a*' and '*doubt*' and '*dout*' are indistinguishable in pronunciation. '*Dout*' may mean '*do out* or *destroy*'. '*To his own scandal*' may signify '*to the level of its own disgrace*'. Or it may imply that the dram of evil makes the reproach properly belonging to it cleave to the whole noble substance, if we make the word '*own*' refer to the latter.

32 Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

I. iv. 90.

Immediately after Hamlet follows the ghost for a secret conference in a place apart, Horatio anxiously asks: "To what issue this will come?" Marcellus answers that he does not know definitely, but he is sure of one thing. There is something deeply and fundamentally wrong in the state of affairs in Denmark. The sentence has become proverbial and is now generally used, when one feels that there is something morbid or unsound, but cannot put one's finger on it.

33 My hour is almost come,
When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
Must render up myself.

I. v. 24.

After taking Hamlet to a 'more removed ground for a private *lete-a-tete*, the ghost points out that it has no time to waste. The hour of its return is drawing near. The allusion is obviously to the fast approaching dawn, when it must return to its place of confinement, which is probably Purgatory, there to 'fast in fires' all the day long. Christianity has long associated sulphurous flames with the places of correction in the hereafter. Dante, as has been pointed out, describes gluttons and drunkards suffering the torments of hunger and thirst in the fires of Purgatory.

34. I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
 Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
 Make thy two eyes, like stars, star from their
spheres,
 Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
 And each particular hair to stand an end,
 Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.

I v. 15 20.

The ghost, when it finds itself alone with Hamlet, alludes to the sufferings it is subjected to in its 'prison-house' which is probably Purgatory (q. v. *The Supernatural in Hamlet*). It is prohibited from revealing what really goes on there. If such revelation were allowed, the ghost can tell a story, whose least important features will shock and frighten Hamlet. It will agonize his soul and freeze his blood with terror. It will make his eyes start from out of his head in wonder and fear. His hair will stand on end like the quills on the nervous and irritated porcupine.

The ghost gives here a graphic picture of the physical effects of a terrifying shock—the blood freezing, eyes starting out of their sockets, hair standing on end. The comparison of the eyes starting from their spheres to stars requires explanation. Shakespeare was following

the Ptolemaic system of astronomy, according to which the heavenly bodies were fixed in a series of concentric hollow spheres, which whirled them right round the earth. '*Porpentine*' means '*porcupine*'. It was a common Elizabethan variation.

35. O my prophetic soul '
My uncle !

I. v. 40-41.

The revelation by the ghost of the crime of Claudius provokes from Hamlet an exclamation, half of wonder and half of satisfaction at a guess proving true. He had never liked his uncle, and he expected that the appearance of his father's spirit in arms indicated the disclosure of some foul crime. But he did not suspect that his uncle's smiling face hid behind it so dark a soul, nor that his father had been so foully done to death. So he describes his soul as 'prophetic' in that it made him suspect foul play, and then his thoughts turn to his uncle, whom he now looks upon 'in a new light.'

36. leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her.

I. v. 86-88.

The ghost, when enjoining on Hamlet the task of taking vengeance on Claudius, cautions him against harming Gertrude. Hamlet must not injure his mother in any way. He must leave her to be punished by God and tormented by the protests of her own conscience. Here is an indication of the undying love that the elder Hamlet has for his queen.

37. My tables,—meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain ;
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark :

I. v. 107-109.

In trying to recover from the shock of the ghost's disclosure of his father's murder, Hamlet indulges in bitter jesting. He takes up his memorandum-book and sets down there that a smiling villain is one of the wonders of Denmark. The crime imputed to Claudius so utterly belies his smiling countenance that Hamlet is induced to look upon smiling villainy as an unusual and wonderful phenomenon. The memorandum-book shows him up as an over-grown student. The use of a 'table-book' was by no means however restricted to University students in the Elizabethan age. Every gallant or man-about-town carried his note-book with him to copy down striking phrases from the books he read, the lectures he heard, the conversation he participated in, or the plays he saw. There are frequent references to such 'tables' in Elizabethan literature. Later in this play, Osric is stigmatised for having a 'yeasty collection' of fine phrases. Nash speaks of 'Proctors and Registers as busie with their Table-books as might be, to gather pharses' (*Have with you to Saffron Walden*). Says a character in the Induction to Marston's *Malcontent*: "I am one that hath seen this play often. I have most of the jests here in my table-book". Of the anonymous clown, whom Hamlet criticises (in the first Quarto), it is said that 'he keeps one suit of jests' so that "gentlemen quote his jests down in their tables *before* they come to the play".

38. There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave,
 To tell us this

I v. 125-126.

Questioned by Marcellus and Bernardo about his talk with the ghost, Hamlet tries to put them off with wild and whirling words. Perhaps he has some idea of telling the story and begins a sentence with 'There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark', possibly intending to

After meeting the ghost, Hamlet makes Marcellus and Horatio swear that they will keep secret what they have seen. Following the ritual of the conjurers, Hamlet then takes his companions to a different place for proposing a second oath. There too the ghost shouts 'swear' directly from underneath where they are, as it did when the first oath was proposed. Hamlet speaks encouragingly to the ghost for having run over to this place also. "Well said," he says, "can you burrow in the earth like a mole so fast as to reach this place so soon? You are an excellent miner."

"Pioner" meant a miner.

41. but breathe his faults so quaintly,
That they may seem the taints of liberty,
The flash and outbreak of a fiery mind,
A savageness in unreclaimed blood,
Of general assault.

II. i. 26-30.

Polonius, when sending Reynaldo to Paris to give some 'money and notes' to Lærtes, delivers to him certain instructions. He is not merely to see and hand over to Lærtes what is entrusted to his care, but he is also to keep his eyes and ears open and learn all that can be learnt about the manner of life the young man is leading in Paris. Let him scrape acquaintance with some friends of Lærtes and slyly suggest that the young man is known to him also and that he is somewhat gay. Without seriously injuring the character of Lærtes, insinuations may be freely made about him of indulgence in drinking, swearing and other youthful vices. "But," cautions Polonius, "speak about his faults with such subtle reservations that they may be seen to be merely the imperfections arising naturally from the wide freedom allowed to him. It must not be suggested that Lærtes is guilty of anything more than the the exuberant self-expression of a high-spirited personality, a boisterous spirit not yet tamed by

the discipline of life, such as is possessed by all young men."

The word 'unreclaimed,' editors point out, alludes to the sport of falconry in which to reclaim is to call back a hawk which has been let fly.

- 42 And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
 With windlasses and with assays of bias,
 By indirections find directions out :

II i. 58-60

Polonius is teaching his servant Reynaldo an elaborate technique of espionage to find out what Læertes is doing in Paris. Reynaldo is to suggest to acquaintances of Læertes that the young man is rather gay and reckless. And he is to gather whatever truth this 'bait of falsehood' may catch. And so, concludes Polonius, we who are possessed of wisdom and capacity, find out the things we are aiming at by circuitous courses, by attempts in which, instead of going straight to our object, we pursue a winding course like a bowl weighted with bias—in short by indirect means.

A *Windlass* meant a winding or a circuitous course, probably from a circuit to intercept game in hunting &c.

Bias is the leaden weight inserted in the side of a bowl to make it travel in a curved line. The game of bowls was popular during Shakespeare's time and there are figures from the game used frequently in his plays

43. I am sorry that with better heed and judgment
 I had not quoted him ; I fear'd he did but trifle
 And meant to wreck thee :

II. i. 105-107.

After listening to Ophelia's account of Hamlet's silent interview with her, Polonius changes his mind

about the depth of Hamlet's passion. He now says: "I am sorry I did not observe him with greater care and judgment. I was afraid that his love was not serious and that he might ruin you."

Quote means to 'mark or observe.' According to some commentators it may also mean "to encourage."

44. Mad, let us grant him then; and now remains
That we find out the cause of this effect,
Or rather say, the cause of this defect,
For this effect defective comes by cause:
Thus it remains, and the remainder thus

II. ii. 100-104.

Ophelia's account of her strange interview with Hamlet makes Polonius give up his suspicion about the sincerity of Hamlet in making advances to her. He jumps to the conclusion that the cause for Hamlet's eccentric behaviour is to be found in the rejection of his suit by Ophelia. And he goes immediately to the King and the Queen to report his discovery. In making that report characteristically he spreads himself out and takes the utmost pleasure in reaching his climax through the most circuitous course. Here is part of his essay in *peri-phrasis*.

"Let us allow", he says, "that Hamlet is mad. It now remains for us to discover the cause of this phenomenon, or rather the source of this defect. For this result, which is a defect, must have its own cause. It cannot have sprung from chance or accident. That is the position as it is. And now let me go on to finish the rest of what I have to say."

- 45 Ay, sir, to be honest, as this world goes,
is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.

II. ii. 178-179.

After reporting to the King and the Queen the true cause, as he conceives it, of Hamlet's malady, Polonius accidentally meets the Prince. Hamlet now deliberately puzzles him under the licence of his assumed madness. First he calls Polonius a fishmonger, probably in the slang sense of a bawd. Then when Polonius protests that he is not one, Hamlet retorts that he wishes that Polonius were at least as honest as a fishmonger. Polonius is amazed that his honesty should be doubted. Hamlet then adds that in the world as it is, scarcely one out of ten thousand is honest. If one is honest, one has to be picked out of ten thousand.

46 For if the sun breed maggots in a dead
dog, being a good kissing carrion,—

II. ii. 181-182.

Hamlet meets Polonius after the latter has announced his theory of Hamlet's madness to the King and the Queen. The Prince reflects on the scarcity of honesty in this world. He then points out that even the divine sun produces corruption, for he breeds maggots in a dead dog, which, to him, appears to be flesh good enough for kissing. If the kiss of the sun produces corruption, how foul must be this world!

The 2nd Quarto and the First Folio read "*good kissing carrion*", and it makes sense—the meaning of "*good kissable carrion*". But Warburton suggested "*God kissing carrion*" meaning that the sun-god kissed the carrion. And this emendation elicited Dr Johnson's praise. But it seems unnecessary to adopt it, as the original text is intelligible as it stands.

Maggots = larva of the cheese-fly, worms generally.

47 Though this be madness, there is a method in't.

II. ii. 202-203.

Polonius, after announcing to the King and the Queen that the cause of Hamlet's malady is his discouraged love for Ophelia meets Hamlet accidentally, and there the Prince fools the old man to the top of his bent. Hamlet has a book, in his hand, and Polonius asks him what he is reading. Hamlet replies that the book slanders old men and makes fun of their physical and mental deficiencies. This is surely unfair, for, if Polonius, an old man, can travel back in time, reversing his gait like a crab, he will be as young as Hamlet

This argument puzzles Polonius. Hamlet seems certainly mad and talks eccentrically. But he does not talk utter nonsense. He can spin a plausible argument. Though he is mad, there is some orderliness in his madness. This line has been interpreted by some critics as indicative of the fact that Hamlet was only pretending to be mad.

48 These tedious old fools !

II. ii. 218

Hamlet meets Polonius after the latter has reported his discovery of the true cause of the Prince's malady to the King and the Queen. Polonius is out to get confirmation of his theory, and Hamlet, under the licence of his madness, talks freely, making oblique allusions to the old man's declining strength and wisdom. The moment that Polonius leaves him, Hamlet becomes his natural self again, and relieves himself of the strain of pretence by the contemptuous exclamation : " These tedious old fools."

49. O God, I could be bounded in a nut-shell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams

II. ii. 247-249.

Talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet expresses the view that Denmark is a prison to him. The crafty spies wish to know whether the Prince is suffering from disappointed ambition. And so they suggest that Denmark seems a prison to him, because his ambitions extend farther. Hamlet replies with an outburst: "Even the smallest limits, even a nut-shell will more than satisfy my ambitions and make me think that I am lord over a limitless domain, were it not that my mind is all unhinged and makes me suffer from nightmares."

Bad dreams were among the traditional symptoms of melancholy.

50 . . . and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition, that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to be a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours

II. ii. 289-294

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet Hamlet to find out the cause of his distemper, Hamlet forces from them the admission that they have been summoned by the King to spy out the truth. And he then proceeds to describe to them the nature of his illness. He has lost all taste for life, the world seems utterly disgusting to him. He goes on: "My mood has become so depressed that this goodly world seems to me a sterile neck of land (jutting perhaps into a sea of troubles.) The glorious sky, ornamented with the glow of celestial bodies and the bracing air of the atmosphere—they all seem to me merely a foul and blasting mixture of vapours."

The source of this great passage of prose has been much discussed. Probably Shakespeare took the idea from Montaigne.

It is to be noted that this passage not merely indicates Hamlet's disgust with life, but also reveals to us by contrast the buoyant spirits and idealism of the Hamlet that was. Note the adjectives, '*goodly* frame', '*brave* o'erhanging firmament', '*majestical* roof', and '*this most excellent* canopy'. Brave—Showy, worthy.

51 What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the word! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me; no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so

II. ii. 294 301

At the behest of the King, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet Hamlet to force out of him the secret of his '*antic disposition*'. Hamlet first greets them as friends, then grows suspicious, and finally forces them to confess that they have been sent for by the King. Immediately Hamlet proceeds to describe to them the nature of his illness, professing not to know its cause. A sense of utter disgust with life has overpowered him. This noble universe appears to him a foul mixture of vapours. "What a wonderful creation is man! How noble is his reason and infinite his powers! How admirable and well-modelled are his appearance and movements! How greatly does he resemble an angel in action and in his power of understanding how closely does he seem a god! He is the beauty of the world and the unparalleled model of excellence among all things endowed with life. And yet '*this quintessence of dust*' seems nothing to me. Man does not delight me. You smile and perhaps wish to suggest that I may find delight in women. Even that, unfortunately, is not the case. Man delights me not, nor women either."

This passage has been singled out for special praise as the finest example of Shakespeare's marvellous prose. It breathes the very spirit of the Renaissance with its infinite faith in the possibilities of human achievement. And in spite of the conclusion it leads to, it shows what a greater idealist was lost to the world in the Hamlet who was become cynical and misanthropic. By contrast, the intensity of Hamlet's malady is made apparent.

The text as given above is punctuated according to the first Folio. Prof. Dover Wilson argues, however, for the punctuation of the 2nd Quarto, which prints the passage thus:

"What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god." He says that the use of exclamation marks makes the passage declamatory, but the punctuation of the Quarto keeps it in accord with the brooding spirit of Hamlet. And he cites two difficulties in the interpretation of the passage, when punctuated according to the Folio. Firstly, according to the Elizabethans, angels were discarnate spirits, whose only form of action was apprehension. Secondly, the adjective "express" does not fit in with 'form and moving'.

52. . . the humorous man shall end his part in peace :
the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are
tickle o' the sere, and the lady shall say her mind
freely, or the blank verse shall halt for't.

II. ii 312-315.

On Rosencrantz and Guildenstern informing Hamlet that a company of actors were on their way to Elsinore, Hamlet promises them good reception. He glances briefly at the stock characters of the drama of the day

and cuts some good-humoured joke at the expense of each. After referring to the king, the adventurous knight and the lover, Hamlet goes on to say: 'The man who plays the part of the eccentric or whimsical man shall be allowed to end his part in peace' the buffoon shall make those laugh, who are risible on the slightest provocation and the youth who plays the parts of women shall be allowed to speak out of his mind freely. If he does not do so, the reason must be sought for in his halting blank verse and not in any discouragement from me".

By '*the humorous man*' is meant not the clown or any comic character. There is an allusion to the theory of humours according to which every individual had some one of four *humours* predominant in him. Excess of any 'humour' gave a determined direction to character, and a humorous man was an eccentric and capricious person. Frequently such persons were represented as quarrelsome, and they rarely ended their lives in peace.

'*Tickle o' the sere*' is a metaphor coined from the mechanism of a musket. The '*sere*' or '*sear*' is 'the pivoted piece in a gun-lock which enters the notches of the tumbler and holds the hammer at full or half-cock.' '*To be tickle o' the sere*' is to be ready to go off at the slightest pressure or provocation.

53. I think their inhibition comes by means of the late innovation.

II. ii 320-321.

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern announce that the tragedians of the city are now on a tour of the province, Hamlet asks: "How chances it that they travel?" Rosencrantz then answers that their 'inhibition' is due to 'the late innovation'. On the significance of the words, 'inhibition' and 'innovation', much has been written. Inhibition, technically, is a prohibition of acting

by the authorities. There were several instances of a ban on acting in London, and it is difficult to fix up which particular order is referred to here. Or, it may be that we have to understand the term in a metaphorical way, not as any ban placed by the authorities on acting, but as something which acted to the same purpose. The rise of a company of boy actors (the Children of the Chapel) may be construed as a more effective 'inhibition' than any official order. '*Innovation*' generally means 'novelty' and this interpretation is supported expressly by the word 'noveltie' which occurs in the garbled versions of this passage in the First Quarto. But Prof. Dover Wilson points out that in Shakespeare's work the word '*innovation*' always has a political significance and hesitantly suggests the Essex rising as a possible reference. (For further details, vide the essay on the Date of *Hamlet*.)

54. . . but, there is, sir, an eyrie of children, little eyases, that cry out on the top of question and are most tyrannically clapped for't: these are now the fashion, and so berattle the common stages,—so they call them,—that many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills, and dare scarce come thither

II. ii. 327-332.

Explaining the reason for the tragedians of the city starting on a tour, Rosencrantz observes: "There is a company of children, like young hawk who declaim their parts in a voice louder than what the subject-matter requires and who are extravagantly applauded for it. They are now the fashion, and have so decried the public playhouses that the gallants, though wearing rapiers, are afraid of what the writers say in ridicule, and do not venture to visit them. (They now attend only the private theatre of Blackfriars where the Children of the Chapel act)."

The reference is to the War of Theatres. A company of boy actors known as the Children of Chapel came into favour in or about 1601, and for a time there was a regular literary battle between the supporters of these boys and champions of older companies of actors. This passage is therefore supposed to fix the date of *Hamlet* (*q. u.* Date of *Hamlet*.)

- 55 ... there was, for a while, no money bid for argument unless the poet and the player went to cuffs in the question.

II ii. 342-343.

Rosencrantz explains to Hamlet the cause for the tragedians of the city leaving on a tour. He refers to the rise to popularity of a company of boy actors and speaks of the enormous interest taken by the public in the controversy between this new company and other groups of older actors. Rosencrantz here says that for a time no play would win money unless it dealt with this familiar controversy, the poet and actor going at it hammer and tongs. There are one or two other possible interpretations. 'Argument' may mean also the plot of a drama, though it is generally used only in the sense of a summary of the plot. In that case, the passage will have to be interpreted thus: "The theatre managers would offer nothing for the plot of a play unless it dealt with the controversy". The objection against this rendering is that Shakespeare generally uses the definite article before 'argument' when used in this sense. Another noteworthy point is that the poet and the actor going to 'cuffs' in the question may be understood to mean that each of them should represent one of the contending parties to the quarrel.

56. Ay, that they do, my lord. Hercules and his load too.

II. ii. 347.

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speak to Hamlet of the rivalry between companies of veteran actors and a freshly formed troupe of boy actors, Hamlet asks whether 'the boys carry it away'. Rosencrantz answers emphatically: "Ay, that they do. They not merely carry it away (*i.e.* win the day) but they also carry away Hercules and the load too." That is, they win all along the line.

Hercules and his load refers to the Globe Theatre which displayed a sign of Hercules carrying Mount Atlas. Since the theatre was rebuilt with this sign only in 1599, this passage is important in determining the date of the play.

(q. v. Date of *Hamlet*)

57. I am but mad north-north-west : when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw

II ii 362 362.

Concluding his private conference with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet tells them that the King and the Queen are deceived about the true nature of his malady. "I am but intermittently mad," he says. "In my lucid moments I can tell chalk from cheese and be as sane as you."

Controversy has raged over the true interpretation of this passage, though the general sense is clear. '*I am but mad north-west*' may mean, 'I am mad when the wind is blowing from north-north-west'. This may be expanded into either, 'I am mad only intermittently', or 'I am mad only on one point, only when the wind blows from one quarter. Some critics believe that this sentence may have no particular meaning at all; and may have been intended by Hamlet as part of his mad man's talk.

The distinction between a hawk and a handsaw has been variously made. The most generally accepted view is that '*handsaw*' is a corruption for '*hernshaw*,' which means a heron. The point about noting the difference between hawks and herons is this. Hawks were often made to chase herons. Now, herons generally fly in the direction of the wind, and when it is blowing from the north, they will fly south. When they fly thus, a watcher has to look in the face of the sun. In the dazzle, it will be difficult to say who are the pursuers and who the pursued. But if the wind is blowing from the south, the hawks and the herons will fly north, and one can easily distinguish between them with one's back towards the sun. Prof. Dover Wilson argues that while a quibble of this kind is undoubtedly intended, *handsaw* must not be taken as a corruption of '*hernshaw*.' '*Handsaw*' may be taken to mean a heavy cutting tool of the pick-axe type. He also quotes a passage from Bright's *Treatise of Melancholy* stating that the wind from the south and and the south-east is 'meet for melancholicke folk'.

58. The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem ultimated : Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light

II. ii. 380-384.

Polonius interrupts the conference between Hamlet and the two spies, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to announce the arrival of the actors at Elsinore. Hamlet pokes fun at him with riddling talk, but he is not to be put off and catalogues their qualities. They are the best actors in the world for enacting all possible types of plays, whether tragic or comic pastoral or tragi-comic, or of any kind made out of a combination of two

or more of these type whether observing the unity of place or rejecting the unities altogether.

Shakespeare is here glancing at the romantic exuberance of Elizabethan drama. Classical tradition made a strict differentiation between tragedy and comedy, and medieval scholarship went one step further than Aristotle in formulating the three unities of place, time and action. The unity of place required that the play should not shift its scenes from place to place. The whole story must take place at a single place. To observe the unity of time one had to complete the action of a play within 24 hours. The unity of action forbade the diversion of interest from the main theme by the introduction of loosely connected sub-plots or episodes. English drama is notorious for its violation of the unities and for its free experimentation with all possible combinations of various types of dramas.

Seneca was a Roman philosopher of the first century, who was tutor, for some time, to Emperor Nero. He wrote some tragedies in imitation of those of Greece, and these greatly influenced the development of Elizabethan Tragedy. (q. v. note on Senecan Influence). Plautus was a Roman dramatist who excelled in comedy.

59. If you call me Jephthah, my lord, I have a daughter that I love passing well.

II. ii. 394-395

Hamlet replies to the announcement made by Polonius of the arrival of the strolling players at Elsinore by quoting a stanza from an old ballad about Jephthah. Polonius replies, "If you call me Jephthah, then it is true I have, like Jephthah, a daughter whom I love surpassingly",

Jephthah is one of the twelve Judges of Israel. The Old Testament relates that he had a daughter whom he loved. After a victory over his foes, he promised to sacrifice whatever met him first on his return home, and it so happened that his daughter was the first to be seen by him. And she had to be sacrificed. Polonius is trying to find out the reactions of Hamlet to his reference to Ophelia.

60. What, my young lady and mistress, by'r lady, your ladyship is nearer to heaven than when I saw you last by the altitude of a chopine.

II. ii. 407-409.

Hamlet, in according 'welcome' to the players at Elsinore, addresses them individually to show that he remembers them all quite well. To the boy who played women's parts, he says, "What my dear young lady, you have grown taller than since I saw you last, by at least the height of a chopine. Let me hope that your voice has not cracked beyond all use, like a coin, cracked within the ring in which the sovereign's head appears, and hence 'bad'."

Chopines were wooden contrivances, covered with leather, worn by ladies especially of Venice, under their shoes, to increase their height. Hamlet humorously supposes that the boy's increase in height is due to his wearing chopines.

At adolescence boys' voices crack: they pass from a childish treble to their full development and in the transition stage, they sound 'cracked.' During Elizabethan days, coins had a ring encircling the sovereign's head, and cracks extending to the ring made the coins 'bad money' (not current.) Note that in Shakespeare's day all women's parts were played by boys.

Beyond the fact that both Jephthah and Polonius had each a daughter, no further comparison is intended.

61. . . . for the play, I remember, pleased not the million
'twas caviare to the general.

II. ii. 417-419.

After greeting the players, Hamlet asks them to recite some passionate speech. "What speech my lords?" asks one of the players. Hamlet at once grows reminiscent. He heard a speech once, he remembers. It was not on the occasion of staging a play, for the play was never acted at all or acted only once. For, like caviare, the Russian condiment prepared from the roe of the sturgeon, for which one has to acquire a taste, this play did not please the common crowd of playgoers.

Caviare, first introduced in England during the reign of Elizabeth, was considered a great delicacy, but it generally proves unpalatable when first tasted.

- 62 And never did the Cyclopes' hammers fall
 On Mars's armour, forg'd for proof eternal
 With less remorse than Pyrrhus' bleeding sword
 Now falls on Priam.

II. ii. 470-473.

These lines occur in the speech recited by the first player before Hamlet, at his request. According to Hamlet himself, the lines are from a play in the repertory of the players. They form part of the speech of Aeneas to Dido describing the death of Priam, king of Troy. Pitilessly, says Aeneas, the sword of Pyrrhus, already red with blood, fell on the head of poor Priam. He killed Priam as unconcerned as the Cyclops, the one-eyed monsters of classical mythology, working as assistants to the divine blacksmith Vulcan, hammered out armours for the war-god Mars, forged to last for ever.

The word 'proof' denoted both an armour as well as its resisting power. 'Sterne' means eternal. The word 'remorse' is here used merely in the sense of 'pity'.

63. That's good: 'mobled queen' is good.

II. ii. 483.

In the course of a speech which the First Player recites about the death of Priam, Hecuba is described as a 'mobled queen'. The word 'mobled' means 'muffled' and here undoubtedly refers to the night-cap she must have been wearing when roused up from her bed. Hamlet questions the propriety of using the word, but Polonius, probably in retaliation for Hamlet's sarcastic fling at him, "he is for a jig or a tale or he sleeps", praises the expression.

64. ... for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time: after your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live.

II. ii. 503-506.

After welcoming the company of actors to Elsinore and hearing one of them recite a speech, Hamlet asks Polonius to look to their comforts. For dramas are like short histories of the times during which they are composed. It is better for one to have a bad epitaph after one's death than to get a bad account of oneself in a play. Shakespeare perhaps intends to suggest that plays are longer-lasting than epitaphs.

The 2nd Quarto has 'abstract', but the Folio gives 'abstracts'.

The expression 'you were better' shows a curious construction. There were old impersonal constructions using the dative in such expressions as 'me were better' 'him were best' etc. People failed to understand that

the constructions in such phrases were impersonal and that the pronouns were inflected in the dative case. And so they corrected 'me' into 'I' and 'him' into 'he'. Here Shakespeare is evidently using 'you' in the nominative case and making the whole construction personal.

65. What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba
 That he should weep for her ?

II. ii. 535-536.

Left alone after the departure of the players with Polonius, Hamlet tries to draw a moral from the way in which the First Player recited the speech about the death of Priam, the King of Troy. When reciting the lines describing the agony experienced by Priam's Queen Hecuba at the sight of her husband's slaughter, the actor's eyes filled with tears. What relation is there between Hecuba and this actor that he should weep for her sake ? Hamlet asks this question only as a prelude to reproaching himself for not identifying himself with his father's cause, when there is so much more reason for sympathy and action.

Priam was the last King of Troy against whom the Greeks fought. Hecuba was his wife. The story of the fall of Troy is related in the Greek epic *Iliad* by Homer.

- 66 I'll have grounds
 More relative than this the play's the thing
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

II. ii. 581-583.

After the players and Polonius leave him, Hamlet begins to ruminate. For the sorrow of Hecuba the actor sheds tears. Yet here he (Hamlet) is, bidden to avenge a foul and unnatural murder by his father's spirit, simply wasting his time and lacking the grit to do his duty. But perhaps he did well to wait. The ghost may be a

spirit from hell, trying to tempt him. He must have grounds more conclusive than the revelation of the ghost for inducing him to assassinate Claudius. He will make the players stage a play, dealing with a theme somewhat resembling the murder of his father : and with this he will try to catch the conscience of the King.

The word 'relative' means literally 'having a closer relation to the matter on hand'.

(For the genuineness of Hamlet's doubts about the ghost, see *Supernatural Element in Hamlet*)

67. Niggard of question ; but of our demands
Most free in his reply.

III. i. 13-14.

Reporting to the King and Queen about their interview with Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern explain what success they have had so far. Guildenstern states that he received them with 'much forcing of his disposition'. Probably fearing that this may be interpreted as utter failure in their mission, Rosencrantz hastens to add that though Hamlet was chary of putting questions, he answered freely all questions which they put. Here is a deliberate misrepresentation by Rosencrantz of what actually took place, obviously with the object of making the King accord him and his colleagues permission to continue in their efforts to probe the secret of Hamlet.

- 68 To die, to sleep ;
To sleep ! perchance to dream : ay, there's the rub ;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause :

III. i. 64-68.

Polonius completes his arrangements for himself and the King overhearing an interview between Ophelia and Hamlet, so that proof may be obtained for his theory that the Prince's 'madness' is a result of discouraged love. Ophelia is stationed as a decoy-duck, and Hamlet enters the trap, all absorbed in desperate meditations. He is contemplating suicide once again. Is it better to suffer quietly the trouble with which he is surrounded or to fight and conquer them? Can he not conquer all grief and pain by death, a sleep from which there is no waking? "To die," he continues, "is to sleep. But is it really to sleep? Will there be nightmares disturbing this sleep? There lies the whole difficulty. For doubts about the nature of the dreams that may visit us after we are dead, must make us hesitate before committing suicide."

The word '*rub*' is a technical term in the game of 'bowls' and means any obstacle which hinders the movement of the bowl along the green. Hence it came to mean 'obstacle,' 'hindrance' etc., and the expression 'there is the rub' is proverbial and means 'there is the difficulty.'

On the exact significance of the phrase, '*shuffled off this mortal coil*' there has been some discussion among editors. '*Coil*' in Shakespeare often means 'trouble, turmoil' and it will be perfectly in accordance with Shakespearean usage to interpret '*mortal coil*' as 'coil of mortality', that is, the 'trouble or turmoil of life.' There is very probably a glance at the other meaning of 'coil' in the sense of a winding of rope. '*Shuffling*' originally meant 'to shuffle off with the feet,' later 'shirking or evading' and finally 'discarding.' Prof. Dover Wilson suggests that the image in Shakespeare's mind was probably that of the soul, 'standing erect and

freeing itself from the body which has fallen down like a divested garment '.

69. That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.

III. i 107-108.

It is the scene in which Ophelia plays the part of a decoy. Hamlet evidently feels irritated at her attempt to foist on him the charge of having jilted her and asks her sharply in two successive questions whether she is chaste and whether she is beautiful. She does not understand him, and expresses her perplexity. Hamlet then says that he means that if she were both chaste and beautiful, she should not allow her chastity to parley with her beauty, that is, that her chastity should have guarded her beauty better than to have allowed it to be used in this fashion to tempt him. There is another sense to Hamlet's sentence, and that is: "You must not allow your beauty and chastity to discourse together". And it is in this sense that Ophelia understands him.

70. Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool : for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go ; and quickly too.

III. i 138 140.

Under instructions from Polonius, Ophelia intercepts Hamlet and engages him in conversation, while her father and the King are eavesdropping. Hamlet probably sees through the scheme, and rails at Ophelia bitterly. "Do not marry", he advises her. "Or, if marry you must, have a fool for your husband. For, you women make monsters of even wise men, after you marry them : and they know it too well to think of marriage for themselves. Better still, enter a convent as quickly as

you can, so that there may be no chances of your breeding some sinners for this world."

The word '*nunnery*' in Elizabethan slang connoted a brothel, and it will be quite in keeping with the whole tone of Hamlet's outburst if we understand it in that sense in this context.

- 71 O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown !
 The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword;
 The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
 The observed of all observers, quite, quite down !
 And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
 That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
 Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
 Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh :
 That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth
 Blasted with ecstasy : O, woe is me
 To have seen what I have seen, see what I see !

III i. 150 161.

When the scheme of Polonius to test the truth about the madness of Hamlet is carried out, the Prince inveighs bitterly against women in general to Ophelia, who baited the trap for him. The coarseness and cruelty of his remarks shocks Ophelia, who exclaims in pity. "O! how noble a mind has been unhinged! Hamlet had all the accomplishments of a courtier, the valour of a soldier and the culture of a scholar. He was the hope and the very flower of the state, the mirror of fashion and the model on whom all endeavoured to form themselves. His demeanour and behaviour were observed by all with a view to imitation. Now he is utterly overthrown. And of all women, I am now the most miserable and wretched in that, having once enjoyed the music of his voice, murmuring honeyed words of love, I now find his noble and sovereign reason deranged, like

bells naturally of a sweet tone but rung in such a way as to be out of tune with one another and jarring to the ear. That peerless form and feature of youth in its full bloom is now blasted by madness. O! woe is me that I should have once seen him as he was and should see him now as he is."

The word '*unmatch'd*' means here 'unmatcheable,' 'matchless.' '*Blown youth*' signifies 'youth in full bloom.' "*Ecstasy*" is madness.

72. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently: for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.

III. ii. 4-8.

This sentence occurs in Hamlet's famous advice to the actors about the manner in which the speech composed by him is to be recited by them. The sense of the passage is clear. "Do not move your hands up and down as though you were sawing the air, but act with quiet dignity. For, in the very height of passion, you must observe a moderation which will make your acting smooth and jerkless." In brief, Hamlet advises the actors against extravagant gestures, and melodramatic exhibitionism. Critics have noted that Shakespeare is probably striking a personal note here and recording opinions which the actors at the Globe must have often heard. Such a reflection is provoked by the fact that it is not easy to find a dramatic justification for this episode with players. Prof. Dover Wilson, however, suggests that Hamlet is anxious about the way in which the actor playing the part of Lucianus may deliver the speech composed by him, and that that anxiety supplies an adequate excuse for these detailed instructions to the

actors.* He thinks that Shakespeare is probably glancing here at the acting of Alleyn of the 'Admiral's Men.'

73. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who, for the most part, are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise :

III. ii. 8 12-

Advising the actors against extravagance or melodrama in acting, before the play, "The Murder of Gonzago" is staged, Hamlet observes: "I am hurt to the depths of my soul when I hear a boisterous actor overdoing the display of some passion in order to please the 'groundlings' whose tastes cannot rise above the appreciation of meaningless dumb-shows and noise". Prof. Dover Wilson contends that the actors subsequently commit the very mistakes Hamlet warns them against*. The dumb-show, he suggests, which is subsequently introduced, serves the purpose of whetting the curiosity of the audience for observing the behaviour of Claudius at the crucial moment. Be that as it may, this passage may be taken as indicating Shakespeare's ideal of the good actor. Groundlings were occupants of that part of the theatre corresponding to the modern pit. It was generally called the Yard, and had no roof, benches or seats. The spectators stood on the ground.

Tear passion to tatters—To rant and bustle.

74. I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant ; it out-herods Herod : pray you, avoid : it

III ii. 12-14-

* See "Play within the Play" elsewhere in this Volume.

Before the 'Murder of Gonzago' is staged, Hamlet gives the players some hints about good acting. There should be no uncouth exhibition of uncontrolled emotion, no extravagance in representing passion, just to please the 'groundlings' whose tastes were decidedly vulgar and childish. "Any one who indulges in such acting", Hamlet continues, "should be whipped." For he would be exceeding in violence the stage-representation of Termagant or Herod. I beg you to avoid such acting'.

Hamlet's enunciation of the principle of sound acting in this context has roused widespread interest among critics. (As to its relevance, please see previous notes)

'Termagant' was supposed to be a deity worshipped by the Saracens, and he is introduced in the miracle and morality plays along with Mahound (Mahomet) as a violent character. Herod was the Roman governor of Palestine during the time of Christ. In mediæval times he became notorious for his violence and rant, mainly on account of the slaughter of innocents that he ordered. To out-Herod Herod is to outdo in fury Herod himself, to become more than a Herod himself.

75. I have thought some nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

III. ii. 32-34.

During the course of his exhortation to the players, Hamlet refers to some actors who acted neither like Christians nor like Pagans, and who indeed did not seem to represent men at all. He says: "I have thought that they were brought into existence not by Nature, but by her hired apprentices, for their work of imitating humanity was abominable". Hamlet means that they did their work so badly that he could scarcely call them men.

A *journeyman* is a hired labourer, literally a worker by day.

It may be noted that the actor's ideal is here by implication given as imitating humanity. All art, according to Aristotle, is imitation of Nature.

76. No, let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp,
And crook the pregnant hinges of the knee
Where thrift may follow fawning.

III ii. 58-60

Just before the Gonzago play is staged, Hamlet finds himself for a few moments alone with Horatio. The Prince immediately begins to praise his friend, and in answer to Horatio's protest, asks: "Why should I flatter you? I can hope to reap no benefit from praising you insincerely." He then goes on to say: "No, let the man of sugared words pay his homage to those who are unreasonably pompous and bend his supple knees, where by flattery he may hope to gain some profit."

'Thrift' is here used in the sense of gain or profit, and 'pregnant' means 'ready, supple.' Of course there is a confusion of metaphors in making the 'candied tongue' crook its knees, but it is easily set right if we make it stand for person with a candied tongue.

77. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee.

III. ii. 69-72.

Finding himself alone for a few minutes with Horatio just before the play, the 'Murder of Gonzago', begins, Hamlet praises him as a true friend and a model character who can preserve the same equanimity in all chances of fortune. He is not a pipe for Fortune's

finger 'to sound what stop she please.' Hamlet goes on to say: "Give me a man who is not at the beck and call of uncontrolled emotion, and I shall keep him in my heart of hearts, as I do you". In paying this tribute to the strength of Horatio's character, Hamlet is confessing his own weakness—the paralysis of his will and his extreme emotional instability. Between Horatio and Hamlet there is the attraction of opposites.

78. . . . if his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's smithy.

III. ii 78-82.

Conferring privately with Horatio for a few minutes just before the commencement of the 'Murder of Gonzago,' Hamlet praises him for his true friendship and sterling worth of character. He then tells Horatio that he has devised a trap for the King. In the play there will be a scene which will represent circumstances closely resembling those attendant on his father's death. When the scene comes, let Horatio observe Claudius with all the concentration he is capable of. "And," continues Hamlet, "if his concealed guilt does not reveal itself when one particular speech is being delivered, then the ghost we have seen is an evil spirit from Hell, and all my fancies about the King's crime are foul, like the atmosphere at Vulcan's forge under Mount Etna".

The expression 'damned ghost' can be understood only in the light of the ghost-lore of the sixteenth century. The orthodox Protestant view was that the spirits of the dead could not come back, and that what people mistook for ghosts were really angels or evil

spirits from hell under various disguises. Hamlet from the very beginning is assailed by these doubts about the authenticity of the Ghost, and it is these that justify the staging of the 'Murder of Gonzago' and the reference to the 'undiscovered country' from whose bourne no traveller returns in the '*To be or not to be*' soliloquy. (For a fuller discussion, vide *Supernatural Element in Hamlet*.)

Vulcan was the blacksmith of the classical gods. The atmosphere of a smithy is bound to be full of soot and smoke. '*Occulted*' means concealed. '*Unkennel*' literally signifies 'to loose from the kennel'. Here it evidently means 'to come out', 'to be found out or discovered.'

The '*One speech*' is the passage which Hamlet said he would compose. It is probably the speech of Lucianus in the play within the play. There is some doubt about the identification, because while Hamlet promises at first a speech of 'some dozen or sixteen lines', the speech of Lucianus is only six lines long.

79. Excellent, i'faith; of the chameleoen's dish: I eat the air, promise-crammed: you cannot feed capons so.

III ii. 91-92

When the King arrives at the auditorium to witness the play, he asks Hamlet: "How fares our cousin Hamlet?" meaning of the course, "How are you, my cousin?" But Hamlet seizes the word 'fare' by the wrong end, deliberately misunderstands the King's enquiry to mean, "What fare (food) is given to you?" and gives a quibbling reply. Excellent fare, indeed, he answers, "from the chameleon's dish. Like that creature, I eat the air, for my diet is made up of promises as unsubstantial as the air. Even

capons cannot grow fat on such food". The promises alluded to are probably those relating to succession made by Claudius. Hamlet here harps on his ambitions just to embarrass and put out the king. Perhaps 'capons' suggests the word 'crammed', and Shakespeare may have intended a suggestion that Claudius was fattening Hamlet on promises, just as capons are fattened on rich food, so that ultimately he might, like the fowls, be led to slaughter.

80. It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there.

III. ii. 102-103.

While waiting for the curtain to go up on the 'Murder of Gonzago', Hamlet asks Polonius whether he had taken part in amateur theatricals, when he was a student at the University. Polonius replies in the affirmative and states that he acted as Julius Cæsar once. He was 'killed' at the Capitol by Brutus. Hamlet at once comments with a quibble. Brutus was a 'brute' to kill so *capital* a young man at the Capitol.

Shakespeare here repeats the error, as old as Chaucer, which locates the killing of Cæsar at the Capitol. Cæsar was, as a matter of fact, assassinated at the Curia Pompeiana, adjoining the Porticus of Pompey's theatre.

The word 'calf' suggests a sacrificial offering. Perhaps, Hamlet insinuates that Polonius is destined for a mere gruesome end.

81. 'For, O! for, O! the hobby-horse is forgot.'

III. ii. 126.

Just, as the curtain is about to raise on the 'Murder of Gonzago', Hamlet refers to his father's death as

having occurred not two hours before. Ophelia gently corrects him and points out that the late King passed away twice two months ago. Hamlet pretends surprise that his father should be remembered still. If one is not forgotten so long after his death, then there is hope that a great man's memory may outlast his death by six months at least. But, of course, to be great and considered worthy of remembrance, one must make pious benefactions now (for the Puritans are in power). Otherwise one is sure to fall into oblivion like the 'hobby-horse' whose exile from men's memories is celebrated in the line: "*For O, for O, the hobby horse is forgot*"

This quotation is evidently from some old and popular ballad for it is referred to by Ben Jonson and Beaumont and Fletcher also. The hobby-horse was a traditional figure in the revels associated with "morris-dances" consisting of a man riding a paste-board or wicker horse with his legs concealed beneath a foot-cloth, going through the body of the horse and enabling him to walk, while false legs appear where his should be, strapped to the sides of the horse. The Puritans tried to modify these revels, and evidently the hobby-horse must have come under their ban.

82. Marry, this is miching mallecho: it means mischief.

III. ii. 128-129.

The dumb-show, preceding the staging of the play, the 'Murder of Gonzago,' puzzles Ophelia who asks Hamlet what it means. Hamlet answers: "Certainly, this is skulking mischief. It means harm".

'*Miching*' is a rare word meaning 'hidden-skulking'. The 2nd Quarto has '*munchyng*', probably a misprint substituting a better known for a less known word.

'*Mallecho*' is a Spanish word for 'mischief, evil wickedness'.

On the exact significance of Hamlet's somewhat cryptic utterance, there is difference of opinion. To whom does the dumb-show mean harm? An obvious answer is that it means harm to the King.

But there are one or two other points to be considered. The dumb-show enacts in detail the plot of the play. And it is one of the many riddles of *Hamlet* whether the King sees the dumb-show. If he does, why does he keep calm then, and blench only when the actual play is staged? Prof. Dover Wilson, following a suggestion of Halliwell Philpips, has argued that the King does not see the dumb-show. He suggests that it was a surprise sprung on Hamlet by the players, and that Hamlet is nervous that this unauthorized innovation will ruin his trap. Mr. Granville-Barker thinks that Claudius sees the dumb-show and controls himself, but breaks down when seeing the play. Hamlet may be giving expression to his annoyance at the actor deviating from his instruction, or predicting trouble to the King.

83. Is this a prologue or the posy of a ring?

III. ii. 141.

A dumb-show precedes the 'Murder of Gonzago, which the strolling players stage before the King Claudius at the request of Hamlet. This enacts in mimicry the substance of the play that follows. Immediately after the dumb-show, a person, styled the Prologue, enters, and Hamlet expects that he will explain the argument of the play. To the Prince's relief and surprise, however, the Prologue contents himself with a request for kindly attention to the play. And so Hamlet asks Ophelia: "Is this such a prologue as

we are accustomed to, or is it a motto engraved on a ring? It is so short."

The dumb-shows were inherited by the Elizabethan drama from the Moralities and probably they may be traced further back to the *tableaux vivants* and other such primitive attempts at drama. They were used by Elizabethan playwrights for either foreshadowing the contents of a play symbolically, or by summarising portions of the action not represented in the play. In the latter case, a Chorus or Presenter explained the meaning of the dumb-show. The tableau presented by players at Elsinore belonged to neither of these types. It rehearsed in detail the action of the play. And when a prologue followed in its wake, Hamlet felt that the plot of the play would be revealed to the King. But the Prologue again did not run true to type, and departed from the stage after a perfunctory appeal to the audience for attention and kindliness.

It was customary in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to engrave mottos, frequently in rhyme, on the inside of rings. Shakespeare gives an example in the *Merchant of Venice*, where the ring presented by Nerissa to Gratiano has the 'posy': "Love me and leave me not".

84. 'It is brief' my lord.
As woman's love.

III. ii. 142-143.

Under instructions from Hamlet, who wishes 'to catch the conscience of the King', a troupe of players, who have come to Elsinore on a tour, present before the royal court of Denmark a play entitled 'The Murder of Gonzago'. A dumb-show precedes the play and is followed by the entry of a Prologue. Curiously enough

the Prologue does not explain the dumb-show or do anything which one may expect, but merely requests the audience to look at the play with kindly eyes. Hamlet is very probably relieved that the details of the plot of the play are not made clear to the King, and he exclaims half in wonder, half in relief: "Is this a prologue or the motto on a ring?" Ophelia agrees that it is brief. And Hamlet comments: "As woman's love" Hamlet supplies, perhaps half unconsciously, the motto for the play that is to come—"brief as woman's love".

85. The lady doth protest too much, methinks.
 O, but she'll keep her word

III. ii. 219-220.

In the play that is presented before Claudius and his court at the instance of Hamlet by a troupe of actors on tour, the hero, a King, suggests to his wife that she should marry again after his demise. She, however, protests energetically against the suggestion. She takes a solemn oath that an evil fate should befall her, if, once having become a widow, she ever marries again. The dialogue must have been extremely embarrassing to Queen Gertrude who tries to find relief in a light comment: "It seems to me that the lady is carrying her protestations too far". And Hamlet re-assures his mother: "O, but she will keep true to her word. No need to suspect her of insincerity"

86. Let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung.

III. ii. 231-232.

The progress of the Gonzago play disturbs the King, who asks Hamlet whether it is likely to be offensive. Hamlet replies in the negative. He gives a short statement about the plot and then adds that persons like the King and himself who have 'free souls' need

not feel in any way affected by the play. "Let the person," he continues, "who has a guilty conscience, wince like a horse, whose 'withers' have been 'galled' by the saddle. But we are like horses whose withers are unwrung, our consciences are free."

By '*withers*' is meant the ridge between the shoulder blades of a horse on which the strain of the collar falls. The expression '*unwrung*' means 'not pinched, galled or hurt.'

W. W. Grey has suggested that Hamlet was referring to his mother in speaking of the *jade*. He paraphrases: "Let your jade of a wife, show her wither galled". The implication is that the Queen was feeling visibly embarrassed at the play.

The second Quarto and the First Folio read '*wince*' which is the old form of '*wince*.' The First Quarto, however, has '*wince*'. In Shakespeare's time '*wince*' meant 'to kick.'

87. Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
 The hart ungalled play;
 For some must watch, while some must sleep:
 So runs the world away.

III. ii. 257-260.

Immediately after the King's discomfiture and departure from the play, Hamlet sings this song in exaltation. It is probably a snatch from some old ballad now lost. The general sense is clear that it is the way of the world that, while some suffer, others remain unhurt. Probably it has no particular reference to the dramatic situation. If it has, Hamlet probably means no more than this: that the King suffers from a guilty conscience, while Hamlet is exulting at the triumph of his stratagem.

The weeping of deer is a poetic tradition, though not a fact of natural history.

- 88 Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers,—if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me,—with two Provincial roses on my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir ?

III. ii. 261-264.

Referring to the triumph of his stratagem, Hamlet exclaims exultingly to Horatio: "In case my fortunes grow worse, would not this feat of mine and some theatrical costume and a pair of shoes, streaked in patterns with double damask roses to hide the laces—would not this get me a partnership in a company of actors?" In effect Hamlet says that if the worst should happen to him, he can always make a living as an actor.

A forest of feathers alludes to the Elizabethan fashion in theatrical costume. *To turn Turk* is 'to grow worse'. The original meaning was "to become a renegade, to give up Christianity for Islam"; thence it came to mean "to grow worse"

'Razed shoes' were shoes with the leather slashed or streaked into patterns. *Provincial roses* were the rosettes worn on the front of the shoes to hide the laces. Literally *Provincial rose* meant a large double damask rose. *Provincial* was a corruption for *Provençal*, meaning 'belonging to Provence', a part of France famous for its roses.

Fellowship alludes to the condition of actors in Elizabethan England. They received no fixed salary, but were paid proportion of the profits.

'A cry of players' means a company of actors. The metaphor is from a cry of hounds.

89. Ay, sir, but "While the grass grows",—the proverb is something musty.

III. ii. 326-327.

Immediately after the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to draw Hamlet out in an attempt to find the cause of his distemper. Hamlet replies curtly that he lacks advancement. "But", ask the spies, "when the King himself has made you the heir apparent, why should you feel your legitimate ambitions thwarted?" "Quite true," answers Hamlet: "but you know the stale proverb—'while the grass grows'"... Hamlet does not complete the proverb, the phrase left out being: 'the steed starves'. Hamlet implies that he cannot afford to wait for fulfilling his ambition.

- 90 Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.

III. ii. 353-354.

To teach the inquisitive Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a lesson, Hamlet asks Guildenstern whether he can play on a recorder. Guildenstern confesses ignorance. Thereupon Hamlet retorts that one who cannot play on a pipe must not try to play on him. "Look upon me as any musical instrument you please," Hamlet says, "you cannot make me dance for your tune. At best you can succeed only in annoying me. My secret will remain with me".

There is a play on the word 'fret' referring to its meaning in a substantive sense, as the string or bar of wood which guides fingering in musical instruments.

91. Let me be cruel, not unnatural.
I will speak daggers to her, but use none;
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites;

III. ii. 378-380.

After the play Polonius asks Hamlet to go and meet his mother. Hamlet, after some preliminary skirmish, accepts the invitation, and dismissing all his companions, soliloquises on what he should say to his mother.

"Let me speak cruelly to her," Hamlet reflects, "but let me not be entirely unfilial. The speech must be harsh, but there must be no actual cruelty in action. My speech in this must not reflect what the soul really thinks".

Unnatural here means more or less 'unfilial'

92

Never alone

Did the king sigh but with a general groan

III iii 22-23.

The performance of the *Gonzago* play upsets the King. The courtiers take it to mean an intentional insult to the Queen and a rash threat of regicide. To the King, however, it makes clear that Hamlet knows the dreadful secret. But secure in the knowledge that the truth about the elder Hamlet's death is still unknown to the court, the King can take advantage of Hamlet's seditious libel and send him into exile. Immediately after the play, he informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Hamlet's lunacy has been taking a dangerous turn and that he proposes to send him off to England with them. The spies echo his sentiments. The person of a king is of the utmost importance to the state. Any danger to him threatens the entire community over which he reigns. "The king never feels any difficulty", Rosencrantz says, "without the whole state partaking in it and suffering therefor".

93.

What if this cursed hand

Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,

Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens

To wash it white as snow ?

III. iii 43 46.

Hamlet's 'mouse-trap' hits the King on the raw. He loses his general *sangfroid* and almost betrays himself. Fortunately for him, the courtiers put another plausible meaning on the play, and for the moment his secret is safe. His resourceful brain, however, takes a quick decision. Hamlet must leave immediately for England and leave never to return. He bids Rosencrantz and Guildenstern prepare for an immediate voyage.

Then for a few minutes he finds himself alone. His conscience seizes hold of the opportunity presented by the shock he has received, and forces him to think of God and prayer. But he is beset by doubts. His offence is grave and foul. Can he venture to approach God for forgiveness? Be his sin never so abominable, will not the abundant mercy of the Lord rain on him and wash his guilt away?

94. O, this is hire and salary, not revenge

III iii. 79.

Hamlet comes on Claudius, kneeling in prayer. He has a golden opportunity to kill Claudius, and he unsheathes his sword to stab his uncle. But at the last moment, a thought strikes him. The King is engaged in prayer, and by killing him now, he may be sending the murderer's soul to heaven. He reflects: "To kill him now will be to do him a favour for which he may have hired and paid me and not to take vengeance on him". Alternatively Hamlet may be understood to say "To kill him now will be to act the part of a hired assassin and not that of one seeking to discharge the duty of revenge".

The second Quarto reads '*base and silly*', while the first Folio has '*hyre and sallery*'. Prof. Dover Wilson emends 'bait and salary' and suggests that 'bait' means

refreshment on a journey (in the king's case, journey to the next world).

On the light that this hesitation on the part of Hamlet throws on his character, *vide Hamlet's Character* elsewhere in this volume.

95. Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hent:

III. iii. 88.

On his way to his mother's bedroom, Hamlet finds the king praying. He lifts his sword to strike him down, but hesitates. Reflecting that by dying at prayer, Claudius may attain to heaven, Hamlet returns the sword to its sheath, saying, "Go back, sword, to your sheath. May you come upon a more horrible opportunity soon".

The word *hent* meaning 'seizure' is not found as a noun elsewhere in Shakespeare. Rarely is it used in Elizabethan English in the sense of design, intention. Literally, it means '*grip, holding*', and we may take Hamlet's apostrophe to the sword to mean literally, "May a more horrible seizure be yours; may you seize him in more horrible circumstances". There is, of course, a quibble relating it to the similar-sounding '*hint*' meaning '*opportunity*' in Shakespeare.

96. Yea, this solidity and compound mass,
With tristful visage, as against the doom,
Is thought-sick at the act.

III. iv. 49-51.

When Hamlet meets his mother at her invitation after the staging of the "Murder of Gonzago," he upbraids her for her sin. She wishes to know what enormity she has committed. The question provokes Hamlet into an angry outburst, in the course of which he points out that her sin casts a slur over all virtuous and true love, and

destroys faith in religion. "Even this solid earth," he adds, "is appalled at your wickedness and is struck with gloom and sick at heart as though the Day of Judgment were near".

Prof. Drover Wilson suggests that Hamlet is alluding to the moon when speaking of "this solidity and compound mass". The theatre in Elizabethan England was open to the sky, and it will be quite natural and easy to point to the moon from the stage. In that case, the reference is obviously to some lunar eclipse

97. Look here, upon this picture, and on this,
 The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.

III. iv. 53-54.

Upbraiding his mother for her marriage with his uncle, Hamlet contrasts his father's qualities with those of Claudius. He points to two pictures, one of his father and the other of his uncle, and makes the contrast clear. "Observe this picture and that" he says, "the portrayed representation of the two brothers!" Commentators debate whether Hamlet is referring to portraits hung on the wall, (Shakespeare may have known of the portrait gallery at Elsinore or of miniatures either produced by himself or one worn by him and the other by the queen. What stage tradition there is, by no means traceable to Shakespeare, supports the theory of miniatures. Some actors, notably Irving, have even assumed that the portraits are imaginary. In the absence of an authentic stage tradition, dating from Shakespeare, it is difficult to pronounce which of these views is correct. Yet there is a certain amount of evidence in favour of the portrait on the wall which may be here mentioned. The *Budermood* clearly refers to full-length portraits on the wall. Rowe's edition of 1709 has a frontispiece of this scene in which there are half-length portraits on the walls.

And what is even more important, the lines

A station like the herald Mercury
New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill,

which follow soon after this passage, suggest a full-length portrait very possibly hung on a wall.

Counterfeit ' is here used in the sense of '*portrayed*' without any implication of ' sham or deceit.'

Presentment ' means representation.

98 Here is your husband; like mildew'd ear,
 Blasting his wholesome brother.

III iv. 64-65

In the bed room scene, Hamlet rebukes his mother for her infatuation with his uncle. He contrasts the two brothers and pours scorn on Gertrude for choosing his uncle as a husband, after his father. He points to the two portraits, one of his father, and the other of Claudius. He describes the majestic personality of his father, and then goes on to deal with Claudius "Here," he says, ' is your husband. Like a mildewed ear of corn blighting a healthy ear by infecting it, he has (by the contagion of his relationship), destroyed his brother."

99 Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;
 And there I see such black and grained spots
 As will not leave their tinct.

III iv. 89-91.

Hamlet's passionate reprimand to his mother in the bedroom scene moves her deeply. She begs Hamlet to speak no more. "You have made me look," she says, "into the depths of my soul. And there I see spots dyed black in the grain, which cannot be washed off. I realise that I have committed sins for which there can be no justification or excuse."

' *Grained* ' here means dyed permanently. Originally

'grain' meant a seed and later a small particle. In this sense it was applied to the small seed-like form of the *cocinnus* insect which is used in the making of red dyes. The colour obtained therefrom being peculiarly durable, we get such a phrase as 'dyed in the grain.'

100. But, look, amazement on thy mother sits
O, step between her and her fighting soul;
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works;

III. iv. 111-113.

The ghost appears before Hamlet in the bed-room scene. Prof. Dover Wilson suggests that the original intention of the ghost was only to "whet" 'Hamlet's blunted purpose' but that later finding the state Gertrude was in, it appeals to Hamlet to cease his passionate reprimand. Be that as it may, the ghost first reminds Hamlet of his promise and then goes on to say: "But see, your mother is in a state of utter bewilderment, Interpose between her and her emotions against which she is fighting strongly Imagination is strongest in those who are physically weakest."

- 101 And, as the sleeping soldiers in the alarm,
Your bedded hair, like life in excrements,
Start up, and stand on end.

III. iv. 119-121

The ghost, when it appears in the bed-room scene, is invisible to Gertrude. Hamlet's conversation with the ghost seems to her like a discourse with vacancy and she asks him what the matter is with him. Like soldiers roused up and standing stiff at the news of the enemy being in the vicinity, his hair lying flat on the head, has suddenly started up and is now standing erect, as if even out-growths, (from the body) have become endowed with life.

Excrements meant in the Elizabethan English outgrowths, excrescences, especially hair, nails, feathers etc.

The invisibility of the ghost to Gertrude is probably the result of her sin. (*Vide Supernatural Element.*)

102 Mother, for love of grace
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass, but my madness speaks :

III. iv. 143-145.

Gertrude, unable to see the Ghost, thinks that Hamlet is suffering from a hallucination. Hamlet no longer hysterical, but calm and stern, replies that his pulse is making as healthful music as hers. He is not overpowered by ecstasy, he is quite sane. 'Mother,' he continues, "as you hope for the grace of God, do not try to beguile your soul with flattering delusion that it is not your sin but my madness which calls aloud in this way "

'Uncion' is a salve or ointment.

'Flattering unction' probably is used in the sense of the unction of flattery or self-esteem.

103. For in the fatness of these pursy times
Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,
Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good.

III. iv. 152-154.

In his harangue to his mother, Hamlet bids her repent. And then he asks pardon of her for his righteous indignation. "For," he says, "in the grossness of times of pampered self-indulgence, even virtue has to apologise to vice, and indeed beg submissively and pay court to it to be allowed to do it good ". The idea is that virtue is no longer held in esteem. "Pursy" means pampered through self-indulgence. Literally it means short-winded. "Curb" here is used in the sense of "to bend and truckle".

104. That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery;
That aptly is put on.

III. iv. 160-164.

In the bed-chamber scene, Hamlet first passionately accuses his mother of sin. And then, after the visit of the ghost, he calms down and bids her repent. He also asks her to give up intimate relations with his uncle. At first it may be difficult. "But," he points out, "that monster, custom, who destroys all sensibility and is the evil genius of our habits, is yet an angel in this respect, that to accustom us to the practice of fair and good actions it gives us a cloak or livery of virtue, which we can, easily put on". Hamlet means that by assuming and practising a virtue even when we do not have it, habit will implant it in us in time.

These lines are omitted in the Folio. Theobald suggested an emendation, '*evil*' for '*devil*' and deleted the comma after '*eat*'. If it is accepted, the passage will mean that "the monster, custom, destroys all sensibility of evil habits, that is, insures us to them." There will be in this case antithesis between '*monster and angel*' and between '*habits evil*' and '*actions fair and good*'.

105. No, in despite of sense and secrecy,
Unpeg the basket on the house's top,
Let the birds fly, and like the famous ape,
To try conclusions, in the basket creep,
And break your own neck down.

III. iv. 191-195.

Hamlet, after upbraiding his mother for her sin and bidding her repent and give up association, as far as possible, with Claudius, asks her not to tell him the

course of this interview. But he does not possess sufficient confidence in her willingness to preserve the secret. So he tells her, "No, you will not keep the secret. In spite of the secrecy which commonsense would bid you maintain, you are sure to let out the secret and ruin yourself, like the famous ape, which opened a basket containing birds on the top of a house, allowed the birds to fly, and then wishing to experiment whether it can fly like them, let itself into the basket and jumped out only to break its neck". The story of the 'famous ape' has never been traced, but its outline is clear "The point for the Queen is," writes Prof. Dover Wilson, "the publicity of the proceeding (on the house's top :—in full view of every one), and that letting the cat out of the bag will involve her own destruction."

106.

Let it work ;

For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petar.

III. iv. 204-206.

Towards the end of the bed-room scene, Hamlet reveals to his mother that he knows the King's plan to send him to England. He is to be marshalled to knavery by his two school fellows who have 'letters sealed'. "Let the plan go forward," he says, "for I mean to destroy them in their own attempt to destroy me. It is great sport to see the inventor of an infernal machine blown into the air by its explosion".

Shakespeare does not make it clear how Hamlet came to know of the King's intention to send him to England. Very probably, as has been suggested, the King first decides to send Hamlet to England for a cure and informs him of it and it is only later on, after the play-scene, that the King decides to put Hamlet to death on his English mission.

'*Enginer*'—engineer. *Petar*: more commonly *Petard*, is a mortar filled with explosives, used for destroying obstacles like walls, gates &c.

Hoist may be the past participle of the old verb 'hoise'. Or it may be that the termination 'ed' in 'hoisted' has been omitted.

107. He's loved of the distracted multitude,
Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes;
And where 'tis so, the offender's scourge is weigh'd,
But never the offence.

IV. iii. 4-7

After the death of Polonius is reported to the King, he sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out where the body of the dead diplomat lies and to bring Hamlet to him. While they are about their task, Claudius tells his courtiers (in IV. 111) that he has to temper justice with mercy in dealing with this dangerous lunatic. "For," the King says, "Hamlet is loved by the senseless masses, who do not follow their judgment, but believe only in appearances. And when people are biased in this way, they will weigh in critical scale the punishment meted out and not the crime."

108. Your worm is your only emperor for diet;
IV. iii. 22-23.

After the assassination of Polonius, when Hamlet is brought before the King, he is asked: "Where is Polonius?" He answers, "At supper". Hamlet then proceeds to explain that Polonius is at a supper where he is being eaten. A convocation of worms specialising in eating politicians are now at work on him. For, after all, Hamlet continues, the worm we all know so well, is the only real emperor as regards diet. Everyone, even the mightiest among us, is ultimately only food for the worm.

The use of the words '*Emperor*' may imply a jesting reference to the Diet of Worms. Or it may be due merely to a reminiscence of Montaigne's sentence: "The heart and life of a mighty and triumphed emperor is but the breakfast of a seerly little worm."

If we compare Hamlet's morbid sentiments here with the macabre humour of the grave-diggers' scene, we shall notice that Hamlet returns to Denmark almost free of mental ill-health.

109. This is the imposthume of much wealth and peace,
 That inward breaks, and shows no cause without,
 Why the man dies

IV iv. 27-29.

After the death of Polonius, Claudius sends away Hamlet to England in the charge of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. On the way to the seashore, Hamlet meets a Captain of the army of Fortinbras and learns from him that the Norwegian is leading his army to fight against Poland over what is more or less a question of honour. Hamlet at first doubts whether Poland will care to engage in the fight. But on hearing that the Poles are as ready to defend their little patch of ground as Fortinbras to attack it, he wonders whether 'this question of straw' deserves a fight by two thousand men. He then finds for himself an explanation for the phenomenon. There is in the body politic of the state, he reflects, a morbid desire to quarrel, arising out of super-abundance of wealth and the idleness of peace. It is like an internal abscess, which kills a man when bursting without any one being the wiser as to the cause of death.

'*Imposthume*' is of French origin and means a swelling with putrid matter under it.

110. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake.

IV. iv. 53-56.

The news that Fortinbras is leading an army to fight for a little patch of ground, spurred by notions of honour, moves Hamlet deeply. He contrasts his inactivity with the promptitude of Fortinbras, and then goes on to indulge in reflections. True greatness does not consist in finding sufficient cause for a fight in trifles, but in being ready to act on the slightest provocation when honour is involved.

- 111 So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to spilt.

IV. v. 19-20.

Ophelia, her mind unhinged and distraught, tries to interview the Queen. Gertrude is at first unwilling to grant an interview but is finally persuaded to see the poor girl. In an aside she reveals the reason for her seeming indifference towards Ophelia. This is the only glimpse we have of the Queen's mind after her memorable interview with Hamlet. She ponders on the sickness of her soul and thinks: "The consciousness of guilt makes us so clumsily suspicious of everything that by our very efforts to prevent discovery, we betray ourselves" '*Jealousy*' here means *suspicion*. '*Spill*' is used in the sense of '*destroy*'.

112. How cheerfully on the false trail they cry !
O, this is counter, you false Danish dogs !

IV. v. 92-93.

While the King and Queen are discussing the pathetic madness of Ophelia, they get a message that Læertes is storming the place at the head of a mob.

Presently another gentleman in attendance reports that the palace guard has been overpowered and that an attack by Lærtēs on the person of the King is imminent. On hearing the news the Queen exclaims that the Danish people are eagerly following a false leader (Lærtēs) and turning against their legitimate sovereign (Claudius). Using a figure from hunting, she says in effect: "You Danes are like undependable hounds. You gladly pursue a wrong scent, and wail when you take up the right scent. You take it in the wrong direction back to the beginning of the trail".

113. There's such divinity doth hedge a king,
 That treason can but peep to what it would,
 Acts little of his will.

IV. v. 106-108.

After the death of Polonius, Lærtēs returns to Denmark and suspecting that the King has had a hand in the sudden and mysterious death of his father, he leads a mob against the palace. Storming his way in, he rushes into the presence of the King and challenges him to answer for the death of Polonius. Fearing violence, Gertrude clutches hold of Lærtēs and tries to restrain his fury. With cool presence of mind, Claudius bids her let Lærtēs free. "For," he observes, "an aura of divinity surrounds a king, as with a hedge, so that treason cannot fulfil its desire but only peep at the King from beyond this hedge."

The idea is that the King is, by the very nature of his office, under the special protection of God. Later, under the Stuarts, this was developed into the full-fledged doctrine of the divine right of Kings.

114. To his good friends thus wide I'll ope my arms,
 And, like the kind life-rendering pelican,
 Repast them with my blood.

IV. v. 128-130.

When Læertes, like an avenging fury, storms his way into the palace at the head of a violent mob and accuses the King of bringing about the death of Polonius, Claudius pleads 'not guilty'. Læertes may have his fill of revenge: it will not affect the King in the least. "Do you make no distinction", he goes on to ask, "between the friends of your father and his foes?" Læertes, naturally, answers that he does make a difference. He will pursue his vendetta against the enemies of his father. "But to his friends", Læertes continues, "I will open my arms wide, and will even feed them with my blood, like the kindly pelican, which sacrifices its life by allowing its young to feed on its blood."

The allusion is to the belief that the pelican feeds its young on its blood, and dies in consequence. Medieval preachers looked upon the pelican as a type of Christ. The belief probably arose by a misinterpretation of what actually occurs when a pelican allows its young to feed on the fish with which it has filled its pouch.

115. O, how the wheel becomes it! It is the false steward, that stole his master's daughter.

IV. v. 155-156.

These sentences form part of Ophelia's pathetic prattle in Act IV, Scene 5, when she runs into the palace and meets the King, the Queen and Læertes. They may be easily dismissed as the pointless chatter of lunacy, but editors have endeavoured to find some meaning in them. There has been some discussion on the significance of the 'wheel'. It has been suggested that the 'wheel' may be (i) the spinning wheel, (ii) the refrain of a song and (iii) Fortune's wheel. If we bear in mind that Ophelia utters these sentences immediately after singing a song, we may easily see how a reference to the refrain of a song fits in with the context. There is a passage in

The Twelfth Night, referring to women singing while plying the spinning wheel, and Ophelia's allusion to the wheel may, on this view, be paraphrased thus: "O, how nicely will this song which I have been singing, harmonize with the spinning wheel". Lastly, it may be argued that as Ophelia was but recently singing:

"You must sing a-down a-down,
An you call him a-down-a".

she was referring to the fluctuations brought about by the turning of the wheel of Fortune.

The story about the false steward who stole his daughter has not been traced. Mr Verity suggests that Ophelia was probably thinking about court-rumours which charged Polonius as a false steward trying to steal for his daughter his master's son and got confused in the thinking.

116. There's rosemary, that's for the remembrance; pray
 you, love, remember: and there is pansies, that's
 for thoughts.

A document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted.

There's fennel for you, and columbines: there's rue
for you; and here's some for me: we may call it
herb of grace o' Sundays. O, you must wear your
rue with a difference. There's a daisy: I would
give you some violets, but they withered all when
my father died: they say he made a good end,—

IV. v. 158-167*

Ophelia in her madness is distributing the flowers that she has collected, to all and sundry. *Rosemary* a symbol of faithful remembrance, is presented to Laertes. Then she takes up pansies, symbolical of thoughts, and

presents them either to Læertes, as some think, or keeps them to herself, as others suggest. Læertes then comments that he is receiving a lesson about madness. Ophelia proceeds with the distribution of flowers. *Fennels* standing for flattery and deceit, and *columbines*, representing unfaithfulness in marriage, are given to the king. *Rue* has a double significance, sorrow and repentance. She herself wears it for sorrow and probably she wishes the Queen to wear it 'with a difference' for repentance. There is probably here a play on the word '*difference*' which in heraldry means 'an alteration or addition to a coat of arms to distinguish a junior member or branch of a family from the chief line'. *Rue* is also called herb of grace and Ophelia prettily supposes that it is called so on Sundays, implying that the name has a religious significance. *Daisy* is yet another symbol of deceit and appears to have been used as a warning to young girls not to trust the fair promises of men. Possibly Ophelia keeps daisies also to herself. *Violets* are emblems of faithfulness. She has no one to present them to. Some suppose that these are presented to Horatio, but he left the scene earlier and there is nothing to show that he re-enters the stage.

To make *a good end* is to die as a good man should die, at peace with all men and trusting in the grace of God.

The word '*document*' in the phrase 'document in madness' is used in the etymological sense of teaching, instruction.

117. . . . so that my arrows,
Too slightly timber'd for so loud a wind,
Would have reverted to my bow again,
And not where I had aim'd them.

Claudius takes some trouble to convince Læertes that he is innocent of the death of Polonius. Læertes asks him why he has not treated Hamlet with the severity which he deserved. The King answers that there are several reasons. For one thing, he loves Gertrude, and Hamlet is the full apple of her eye. For another, Hamlet is exceedingly popular. The people love him so much that they may look upon any fetters that may be put on him, as ornaments. "And so," Claudius continues, "any arrows that I may aim at him, being made of too light a wood to fly in this rough gale (of popular infatuation) will come back to my bow, instead of hitting him. In other words, any attempt that I may make to injure Hamlet will recoil on me, so greatly is he loved by the people of Denmark."

118

... for youth no less becomes
The light and careless livery that it wears
Than settled age his sables and his weeds,
Importing health and graveness.

VI. vii. 78-81.

Succeeding, after some difficulty, in making friends with Læertes, Claudius suffers a rude shock in learning that Hamlet has returned safely to Denmark. Resourceful as ever, he hatches another plan for killing Hamlet on the spur of the moment, and sets about getting the support of Læertes for it. Claudius wishes to suggest that Læertes should challenge Hamlet to a fencing match and, using an 'unbated foil', kill him by seeming accident. Circuitously and cautiously, Claudius approaches the subject. There has been talk for some time past, Claudius begins, on one of the excellent accomplishments of Læertes. The praise bestowed on Læertes for this has roused Hamlet's envy. It is not indeed among the young man's best qualities. In his opinion it is of the best importance. Læertes then asks what it is.

Claudius then gently corrects himself. It is an ornament of youth. And after all, why should we consider it as of the 'unworthiest siege'? "For", Claudius continues, "youth is not less in accord with its rarely jaunty dress, than sedate old age with its dark sables, indicating prosperity and gravity of demeanour". In other words, it is as natural for youth to have its own scale of values as old age, and it is by no means certain that the scale of values preferred by age is ultimate and fundamental. 'Sables' and 'weeds' is a hendiadys, for 'weeds which are sables'. 'Livery' is any kind of dress in Elizabethan English. Health may mean prosperity in this context. Some interpret that 'youth's careless livery' imports health and sables import 'graveness'.

These lines are not found in the first Folio.

119. For goodness, growing to a plurisy,
Dies in his own too much: that we would do,
We should do when we would; for this "would"
changes,

And hath abatements and delays as many
As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents,
And then this "should" is like a spendthrift sigh,
That hurts by easing.

VI. vii. 117-123.

Trying to persuade Lærtès to avenge the death of his father, Claudius asks the young man whether his father was dear to him. "Why do you ask this?", Lærtès demands. Claudius then goes on to point out that even love cools off in course of time. "Goodness, growing to a fulness, dies of its own excess. What we wish to do, we must do when the desire is strong in us. For this desire to act may change and is liable to be reduced in its fervour or to be delayed through persuasion by others, or through restraint, or through the mere

accidents of life. And when too late one thinks that one ought to have acted in time, the feeling of self-condemnation relieves our conscience at the same time that it pains it, just as a sigh eases our breast, while exhausting the blood ”.

Here is the basic moral of the play. Claudius is unconsciously commenting on Hamlet's procrastinations.

‘Plurisy’ is here used in the sense of fulness, superabundance. By a wrong association with Latin *pluris*, meaning ‘more’, the word acquired this meaning. There is a disease ‘*pleurisy*’ affecting the membranes covering the lungs, and thus the word may be traced back to Greek ‘*pleura*’. It is possible that Shakespeare is playing here on both the meanings of the word and that the painful sigh is suggested by the pulmonary disease. There is also a reference to the Elizabethan belief that sighs drain the heart of blood and ultimately produce anæmia.

This ‘*would*’ means, this desire, inclination. *Spend-thrift* :—wasteful, here costing blood.

These lines are not found in the first Folio.

120.

Adieu, my lord :

I have a speech of fire, that fain would blaze,
But that this folly douts it.

IV. vii. 189-191.

News of the death of Ophelia moves Læertes to tears. The Queen informs him of the accident Ophelia met with, when he is conferring with the King, devising a plan to murder Hamlet. The death of Ophelia angers him all the more against the Prince. And so he says to the King : ‘Good-bye for the present, Your Majesty. I have a speech of fire that is eager to blaze out, but these tears extinguish the flame’’. That is, Læertes

wishes very much to express his indignation and anger, but his tears stand in the way.

The first Folio reads '*doubts*', the second Quarto has '*drownes*'. '*Douts*' is Knight's emendation and means *extinguishes*, *puts out*.

121. It must be *se offendendo*; it cannot be else For here lies the point: If I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act: and an act hath three branches; it is, to act, to do, to perform: argal, she-drowned herself wittingly.

V. i. 9-12.

The two grave-diggers discuss whether Ophelia can be rightly accorded Christian burial. One of them says (the second grave-digger) that the Coroner has decided that she was not a suicide. "Did she drown herself in her own self-defence?" asks the other. The reply is that the Coroner has so decided and that there is an end to the matter. The second grave-digger pursues the question further. "It must be *se offendendo* and nothing else", he declares. By this Latin phrase *se offendendo*, he probably refers to *se defendendo*, in self-defence, a verdict given in cases of justifiable homicide. There is a glance probably at the question previously asked: "Was it in self-defence?" The Clown may also be confusing *offendendo* with some kind of offence. Lastly, he may be having a shot at *felo de se*. He then goes on to prove that Ophelia deliberately committed suicide.

The three branches of an act probably allude to the arguments in an old case *Hales vs. Petit* (1554) familiar to the Elizabethans.

Argal is the Clown's corruption for '*ergo*', *therefore*.

122. Go, get thee to *Yaughan*; fetch me a stoup of liquor.

V. i. 88-89.

The first grave-digger asks his fellow labourer to go and fetch him a stoup of liquor.

There has been much speculation about who *Yaughan* is. The Second Quarto reads: "Go, get thee in and fetch me a soup of liquor"

Yaughan may have been the name of an actual tavern-keeper in London, whom Shakespeare's audience might have known. Mention is made of a Johan by Ben Jonson, and an attempt has been made to identify him with *Yaughan*. Another theory is that *Yaughan* is a Welsh name. Prof. Dover Wilson suggests that *Yaughan* may be a corruption for Johan, which Shakespeare would have written *Yohan*.

123. Did these bones cost no more the breeding, but to play at loggats with 'em? mine ache to think on't.

V. i. 88-89.

Returning to Denmark, Hamlet finds two grave-diggers preparing a grave. Surprised at the cavalier manner in which they were dealing with the bones and other human remains their spades encountered, Hamlet begins to ruminate on the lives and fortunes of those now reduced to bones. And then he asks: Are these bones so cheaply bred, are they of so little importance, that they should be used for playing at loggats?

Loggats is a game like bowls played on a floor strewn with ashes. A wooden wheel forms the Jack at which small logs (*loggats*), shaped like truncated cones, are thrown. Probably, as has been suggested, Hamlet

meant to compare the skull to the Jack at which bones were thrown.

‘Loggats’ appears to be the diminutive of log.

- 124 Where be his quiddities now, his quillets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this rude knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery?

V. i. 95 96

In the grave-diggers’ scene, Hamlet finds the ‘clowns’ turning up skull after skull while preparing a grave. As each one comes up, Hamlet tries to fancy who the owner of the skull might have been. The second skull thus thrown up, Hamlet imagines, might have belonged to a lawyer. He then goes on to ask: “Where are his sophistries and legal quibbles, his cases, tenures and tricks? Why does he now allow this unmannerly churl to knock him about the head with a dirty shovel, without threatening him with an action for assault and battery?” In other words, all his lawyer’s skill avails him not in the fate that has overtaken him. Like others, he too has returned to dust, and his bones are playthings for sextons and grave-diggers.

Quiddity:—literally *what-ness*, means a sophistry. Medieval schoolmen used the term in their exercises in hair-splitting logic.

Quillet:—probably from Latin *quidlibet*, (anything you please) means here a legal quibble.

Sconce, originally meaning a small fort, is here used in the sense of ‘head’.

The Folio reads 'quiddits' and 'quilletts', while the second Quarto has '*quiddities*' and '*quillettes*'

125 I think it be thine, indeed : for thou liest in't.

V i. 117.

Hamlet asks the first grave-digger as to whose grave he is digging. He answers: "Mine, sir". Hamlet then retorts: "It must indeed be yours, for your lie in it." There is an evident play upon the two meanings of '*lie*'—'*to be down*' and '*to utter a falsehood*'. Remaining within the grave, he is digging, the clown may be supposed to '*lie*' in it. And as he says that the grave is his, he is lying, *i.e.* uttering an untruth. The grave-digger called it his because he had prepared it.

126. How absolute the knave is ! we must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us.

V. i. 131-132.

The first grave-digger takes delight in evading an answer to Hamlet's question about whose grave he is preparing. "What man dost thou dig it for?" asks Hamlet. "For no man, sir" answers the clown. "What woman, then?" Hamlet questions. "For none, neither," replies the clown. Hamlet finally has to frame the question: "Who is to be buried in't?" Now of course evasion is no longer possible, and the clown declares, "One that was a woman, sir, but rest her soul, she's dead"

Commenting on this dialogue, Hamlet says, "How punctilious and precise this fellow is! I must make my meaning as scrupulously clear as the mariner's compass-card makes the direction of the compass. Otherwise the least ambiguity of meaning will involve us in trouble."

'*By the card*' here means '*with precision*.' Some think that there is a reference to the mariner's chart. Another view is that a card on which the points of the compass were marked is alluded to. It has also been suggested that the card and calendar of etiquette, which is another name for a book of manners, dealing with nice questions of behaviour, is meant here.

'*Absolute*' is used in the sense of *precise, exact*.

127. . . he shall recover his wits there; or, if he do not
it's no great matter there.

V. i. 144-146.

Engaging in conversation with the first grave-digger, Hamlet asks how long he has been a grave-digger. He replies that he began his job on the day on which the late King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras. This does not appear to enlighten Hamlet much, and so he asks again how long ago it was. The grave-digger replies that it was the day on which young Hamlet was born, the Prince who is mad and has been sent to England. "Why was he sent to England?" enquires Hamlet. The grave-digger replies that he was sent there because he was mad. He may recover his wits there: even if he does not, it does not matter much.

The madness of the English is an ancient joke. That is why the grave-digger says that even if Hamlet continues to be mad in England it does not matter. He will be only in a country of mad folk.

Mr. Verity points out that the grave-digger's failure to recognise Hamlet shows how great a recluse the prince was.

128. Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her,
let her paint an inch thick to this favour she
must come; make her laugh at that.

V. i. 183-187.

The first grave-digger takes up a skull and says that it is that of Yorick, late court-jester. Hamlet feels at once interested and receives it in his hands. And then looking at it he reflects on the state to which poor Yorick whom he knew so well, has been reduced. Where are his jokes and boisterous spirits now? "Here," Hamlet continues, "is a fine joke for you, you can make it. Go to some fine lady, and tell her that however she may paint and powder herself, to this condition she must ultimately come. No amount of cosmetics will preserve her beauty for ever. Make her laugh at this joke."

Favour is probably used here in the sense of *appearance*.

- 129 Imperious Cæsar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away :
O, that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall to expel the winter's flaw !

V. i. 206-209.

The spirit in which the grave-diggers go about their business and the sight of Yorick's skull makes Hamlet ponder over the ultimate futility of life. Every one has to return to dust, however great and mighty. Hamlet summarises the mode of it all in a quatrain. The great Cæsar, who ruled the world, turns to dust after his death. The material body which kept the world in awe has now become dust and may be used for patching up holes in a mud-wall.

'*Imperious*' is here used in the sense of '*Imperial*,' which indeed is the reading of the Folio.

'*Flaw*'—gust of wind.

130. Lay her i' the earth,
 And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
 May violets spring ! I tell thee, churlish priest,
 A ministering angel shall my sister be,
 When thou liest howling.

V. i 231-235.

Læertes complains to the officiating priest at the funeral of Ophelia, about the summary nature of his sister's burial rites, but the latter observes that nothing more can be done and adds that the Church had stretched a point even in allowing burial in sanctified ground. Læertes gets wild and says. "Bury her now. May violets spring from her pure and innocent flesh ! You churlish priest, who speak so much about my sister's sin, I tell you that she will be an angel in Heaven, when you will be suffering in Hell "

Læertes tries to rebut the traditional view of the church on suicides. He does not hold it sinful to take away one's life. At any rate, so pure and lovely was the character of Ophelia, that she is certain to go to Heaven, while narrow-minded bigots like the officiating priest will suffer in Hell for their lack of charity.

'*Howling*' here evidently means '*howling in Hell*'.

131. What is he whose grief
 Bears such an emphasis ; whose phrase of sorrow
 Conjures the wandering stars and makes them stand
 Like wonder-wounded hearers ? This is I,
 Hamlet the Dane

V. i: 247-251.

Læertes jumps into the grave after Ophelia has been lowered down and calls extravagantly for earth to be heaped upon both the 'quick and dead,' till a mountain is raised overtopping Pelion or Olympus

This display of grief and almost vulgar indulgence in hyperbole irritates the sensitive soul of Hamlet, and he advances from his secluded post of observation to the group of mourners beside the grave, asking: "What manner of man is he whose grief is made so prominent and important, whose expression of sorrow is couched in such extravagant language that it bewitches the planet and makes them stop in their courses like men stunned with surprise? It is Hamlet of the Royal House of Denmark, who is speaking."

'*Wandering stars*' are *planets*, so-called in opposition to 'fixed stars'. The word '*conjure*' is associated with the art of witchcraft and sorcery, which were supposed to exercise magical powers over even the stars planets.

'*wonder-wounded*'—struck with wonder, stunned by and surprise.

'*Hamlet the Dane*' means not that Hamlet was a native of Denmark, but that he was the King, or at least that he belonged to the royal house.

The statement, "I am Hamlet, the Dane," made in the presence of the King is almost a challenge to the latter

It is characteristic of Hamlet that his fine sense of proportion should have felt offended at the lack of taste shown by Læertes in the exhibition of his grief.

132. Woo't drink up eisel?

V. i 269.

This is one of the many rhetorical question addressed by Hamlet to Læertes in protest against the latter's attempt to monopolise all grief at the death of Ophelia. The scene is at the grave of the dead girl.

The word '*eisel*' has provoked much editorial comment. The first Quarto reads '*vessel*', the second Quarto '*Esill*' and the first Folio '*Esele*' in Italics. '*Eisel*' was one of Theobald's famous emendations. '*Eisel*' is an archaic word for vinegar and is used by Shakespeare in Sonnet CXI. One of the many spellings for the word recorded by the New English Dictionary is '*ezille*' and this is not far different from the 2nd Quarto's reading. On the point about drinking vinegar, much has been written. One plausible suggestion is that it was customary among Elizabethan lovers to do grotesque feats to prove their love. A common form of this extravagance was drinking nauseous draughts. Another view is that the drinking of vinegar will produce melancholy. The printing of '*Esile*' in Italics in the Folio has led to a theory that it is a proper noun, being the name of some river, variously identified with the *Yssel* in Holland, the German *Wessel* (Vistula), the Danish *Oesel*, the English *Ouse*, and so forth. Modern students prefer the view that vinegar is mentioned here.

Woo't:—a colloquial contraction for 'wouldst thou'.

- 133 And if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
 Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
 Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
 Make Ossa like a wart! Nay, an thou'lt mouth,
 I'll rant as well as thou.

V. i. 273-277.

Provoked by an extravagant display of grief by Lærtes Hamlet jumps alongside of him into Ophelia's grave and challenges him to show that his love was greater than Hamlet's. Anything that Lærtes does and more, Hamlet is prepared to do. "If you prattle about mountains being heaped over you in the grave, why then let them throw enough earth over us to raise the ground

here to the level of the sun and make Ossa look in comparison like a small wart."

The 'prating' about mountains is an allusion to the lines spoken by Lærtes earlier :

Till of this flat a mountain you have made
To o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head
Of blue Olympus. (V. i. 245-247).

Ossa :—a mountain in Thessaly, frequently used in the phrase 'to pile Pelion on Ossa',

The '*burning zone*' is the sun.

134. Let Hercules himself do what he may,
 The cat will mew, and dog will have his day.

V. i. 284-285.

Hamlet has almost a regular fight with Lærtes at the grave of Ophelia, irritated by the latter's unmannerly display of vulgar grief. Then he cools down a little and asks Lærtes : "Why are you treating me like this? I have always loved you. But it does not matter. You may bluster away, my young Hercules, but poor Hamlet's turn will come. Every dog has its day."

The reference to Hercules has been variously understood. Is the intended comparison of Hercules with Hamlet or with Lærtes? That is the point at issue. Mr. Verity takes it that Hamlet is comparing the bragging Lærtes with Hercules and paraphrases : "Bluster away, my young Hercules, poor Hamlet's turn will come". But Dowden writes : "Lærtes must have his *where* and bark—if Hercules cannot silence dogs, much less I, who am little like that hero". He suggests a reference back to Act I, Scene 2, 153, where Hamlet says : "No more like my father than I to Hercules!"

"Every dog will have his day"—an old proverbial saying, meaning that even those who are treated contemptuously are sure to achieve prosperity some time.

135. There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
 Rough-hew them how we will,—

V. ii. 10-11.

Hamlet's 'sore distraction' has made him something of a fatalist. In trying to tell Horatio the story of his discovery of the King's secret purpose in sending him to England, Hamlet wishes to begin by saying that he acted on a rash impulse in opening the sealed commission entrusted to the care of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He says no more than 'rashly' and then begins to moralize on the significance that our 'rashness' may bear in the divine government of the universe. Rashness may succeed when deep laid plans may go astray. There is a Divine Power, shaping our destinies, however clumsily we may try to fashion them ourselves.

- 136 And many such-like "as'es" of great charge,—
 That, on the view and knowing of these contents,
 Without debatement further, more or less,
 He should the bearers put to sudden death,
 Not shriving-time allow'd.

V. ii. 43-47.

Stealing in one night on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, when they were sleeping soundly, Hamlet takes away their sealed commission, breaks it open and reads his death-warrant. Relating this episode to Horatio in *Act V, Scene 2*, Hamlet proceeds to state how he 'hoist the enginer with his own petar'. He substitutes another letter for the one he has stolen. Describing its contents Hamlet says that he began the letter with many earnest 'conjurations' like "As England was their faithful

tributary, as love between them might flourish like the palm " and so on. He adds: "With many such weighty clauses beginning with 'as' I wrote as from the King a grave adjuration that immediately on seeing and reading the contents of this communication, without any further consideration however slight, the King of England should put the bearers of the message to death, without even allowing them time for making the final confession to their priests."

Dr. Johnson pointed out that a quibble was intended 'between *as* the conditional participle and *ass* the beast of burthan' and that "*charg'd*" anciently signified 'loaded'.

137 . . . indeed, to speak feelingly of him, he is the card or calendar of gentry, for you shall find in him the continent of what part a gentleman would see.

V. ii. 107-110.

Osric, the fop, goes to Hamlet to persuade him to engage in a fencing match with Læertes. He begins by saying that a certain Læertes has recently arrived at the court, and goes on to praise him. "Indeed," he observed, "to speak with due appreciation of his qualities, he is the very image of gentlemanliness and, as it were, a guidebook of breeding. For you are sure to find in him the sum total of all the qualities which a gentleman may wish to contemplate for imitation"

Card:—Map or chart, hence image or picture.

Calendar:—register; guide-book, directory; hence model, example. Some editors paraphrase 'card or calendar of gentry' as 'the map by which a gentleman is to direct his course, the calendar by which he is to choose his time'.

gentry :—gentlemanliness, courtesy, elegance.

feelingly :—with a due appreciation of his qualities.

The Second Quarto reads '*feelingly*' while some copies of it have '*sellingly*'. Prof. Dover Wilson argues for '*sellingly*' in the sense of 'speaking as a salesman', as Osric has been trying to boost Læertes like a salesman.

Part :—Nicholson emended '*parts*', which appears to suit the context better.

continent :—a geographical metaphor, contrasting 'part or parts'. Læertes is the continent, one may paraphrase, whose parts a gentleman would wish to see.

138. The king, sir, hath laid, that in a dozen passes between yourself and him, he shall not exceed you three hits : he hath laid on twelve for nine ;

V. ii 158-160.

Here is a statement by Osric of the wager between Læertes and the King. The arithmetic of the bouts and hits has provoked some controversy. There appears on the face of it to be some contradiction between 'dozen passes' and laying on 'twelve for nine'. There cannot be twelve hits by one and nine by other of the fencers in a 'dozen passes'. Judged in the light of the combat that follows, the wager appears to have been on the King's side that in about a dozen passes, Læertes shall not win Hamlet by more than three hits : that is, Hamlet is to have a handicap of three hits. Prof. Dover Wilson tries to reconcile the contradiction by suggesting that the '*he*' in the second sentence is Læertes and that '*laid on*' means 'laid down conditions'. '*Twelve for nine*' implies, according to him, that there must be a match of twelve passes instead of the usual nine, as in a match of

nine passes, to allow Hamlet to start 'three up' will be to give fearful odds in his favour.

Another view is that 'dozen' is here used indefinitely like hundred, thousand, etc.

139. To this effect, sir; after what flourish your nature will

Y. ii. 171-172.

This is spoken by Hamlet in dismissal of Osric, after the latter delivers his message and means. "My answer is to this effect, sir. So long as the purport is conveyed, I don't mind the manner in which it is expressed. Use what flourishes you like, employ as many euphuisms as you please."

The '*flourish*' referred to is the euphuism of Osric. Lyly in his *Eupheus* invented an elaborate prose style, whose artificiality later evoked criticism. Apparently, Osric is the type of Elizabethan courtier, trying to be grand and elegant, but succeeding only in being affected and ridiculous.

140. Thus has he—and many more of the same bevy, that I know the drossy age dotes on——only got the tune of the time and outward habit of encounter; a kind of yesty collection, which carries them through and through the most fond and winnowed opinions; and do but blow them to their trial, the bubbles are out.

Y. ii. 179-184.

Here is Hamlet's final comment on Osric, after the latter departs. "In this manner," observes Hamlet, "he—and many more of the same type, whom this degenerate age, which is the mere scum of former days, dotes on—has learnt the fashion of the time, and the prevalent manner of meeting and talking with people, a

collection of phrases etc., which floats on the mind like froth upon a vat, and leads them into all kinds of foolish and fantastic opinions. But do but test them by blowing, and the bubbles burst in a moment."

A much disputed passage.

'*Bevy*' is the reading of the First Folio. The Second Quarto has 'breede' '*Bevy*' meaning a flock, especially of birds, harmonises well with the '*Lapwing*' of the previous sentence.

Outward habit of encounter :—Thus the first Folio. The Second Quarto has 'out of an habit of encounter' making the 'yesty collection' result from the habit of encounter.

'*Fond and winnowed*':—So the first Folio. The Second Quarto has '*prophane and trennowed*,' evidently a corrupt reading. If we adopt '*fond and winnowed*,' it means that the acquisition of the fashionable prattle of the time leads Osric and his ilk to extreme lengths of foolishness and over-refinement. Warburton emended '*fann'd*' for '*fond*', an ingenious guess, which has only this against it that it introduces a new figure in the middle of a half-developed metaphor. Another suggestion is '*profound*' for '*the profane*' of the Quarto, and that will give the meaning: "The frothy talk helps them impose on wise and experienced men of the world."

141 If your mind dislike anything, obey it : I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.

V. ii 205-206.

Horatio, hearing that Hamlet has a presentiment of evil, begs him not to proceed with the fencing match "If your mind dislikes anything", he says, "obey the

promptings of your heart. I shall forestall the arrival of the King and the court and tell them that you are not in a fit condition to participate in the match".

repair :—arrival.

This speech is noteworthy as one which brings Horatio out of his usual negative attitude and passivity. Any possibility of trouble to Hamlet immediately spurs him to action: he is no longer the ideal listener, dotting the i's and crossing the t's of Hamlet's views.

142. . . . the readiness is all: since no man has aught of what he leaves what is't to leave betimes?

V. ii. 210-212.

"Preparedness to die, when the call comes, is the most important (lesson of life). Everything depends on it. Since no man can carry with him anything of what he has to leave behind him, why complain of dying young?" So says Hamlet in support of his decision to defy his presentiment before the fencing match with Læertes.

The reading adopted is that of the Folio. The Quarto has: "*Since no man has of aught he leaves knows what's it to leave betimes, let be.*" Johnson inserted commas after *of* and explained: "Since no man knows aught of the state of life which he leaves, since he cannot judge what other years may produce, why should he be afraid of leaving life betimes?" "*Let be*" becomes a separate sentence on this view. Prof. Dover Wilson paraphrases the Quarto reading thus. "Since no one can tell from anything on earth (of aught he leaves) what is the right moment to die, why trouble about it?" "Betimes" is here understood in the sense of 'in good time, before it is too late, at the right moment.'

Brandes has pointed out that the passage has a strong flavour of Montaigne.

143. He's fat, and scant of breath

V. ii 276.

After the bouts of the fencing match have been played, in both of which Hamlet succeeds in '*hitting*' Læertes, the Queen observes that Hamlet is '*fat and scant of breath*'. It has been suggested that Shakespeare was here glancing at the physique of Richard Burbadge, the famous actor who played the hero's part in the play. Burbadge was among the three theatrical friends mentioned by Shakespeare in his will, and there must have been sufficient intimacy between them to justify the poet making fun of his growing corpulence. But Burbadge's fatness is purely hypothetical. And even if the Elizabethans had no craze about slimming and might have admired the figure of Henry VIII, there is much to be said for the objection that Shakespeare would not have cared to draw pointed attention to the unfitness of Burbadge (if unfit he was) to play the part of a youthful student. A more plausible explanation is that '*fatness*' means '*out of condition*', and this is supported by the immediately following '*scant of breath*' and Hamlet's own confession to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he had '*forgone all custom of exercise*'. But it conflicts, however, with Hamlet's own definite statement to Horatio made a few minutes ago that he had been 'in continual practice, since he (Læertes) went to France'. Act V, Scene 2, 197-8) Prof. Dover Wilson therefore suggests that '*fat*' here means '*sweaty*', a meaning not unknown in Elizabethan usage, and argues that this interpretation is supported by Hamlet's refusal to drink—it was considered unhygienic to drink during a sweat—and the Queen's offer of her napkin to wipe his brows.

144. Why, as a woodcock to mine own springs, Osríc ;
 I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery

V. ii. 294-295.

During the course of the fencing match arranged by the King, Lærtes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword according to plan. But contrary to expectations, there is a scuffle which leads to an exchange of 'foils', and Hamlet wounds in turn Lærtes with the poisoned sword. Both fall down and lie bleeding. To Osríc, who enquires of Lærtes how he is feeling, the latter replies that like the foolish woodcock he has been caught in a snare—a snare which he himself prepared and intended for another. It was in the fitness of things that he should die by his own indulgence in treachery.

The woodcock was proverbially noted for its foolishness in getting caught easily in traps.

Prof. Dover Wilson suggests that the confession of Lærtes to Osríc indicates that the latter was privy to the whole plot. Osríc was one of the judges of the contest, and it would have been difficult for Lærtes to get hold of a poisoned sword without his active co operation. The suggestion derives further support from the fact that curiously enough Osríc makes no further enquiries about the 'springs' and 'treachery' of Lærtes which one may expect him to do, if the truth is heard by him now for the first time.

145. Is thy union here !

V. ii. 314

After Hamlet stabs the King with his envenomed sword, the latter calls on his friends to help him, saying that he is but hurt. Hamlet is irritated that Claudius should still have hopes of living, and pours the poisoned

wine down his throat. And then he asks with a bitter quibble: "Is thy union here?" Hamlet plays on the two meanings of '*union*'--Claudius is going to have a reunion with his Queen in the hereafter. He is drinking the wine with the pearl (union) dissolved in it.

Hamlet is referring to the '*union*' which the King put in the poisoned wine. Perhaps the King introduced the poison on the pretext of putting the pearl in. It was an ancient custom to dissolve pearls in liquor.

146. I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.

V ii. 334-329.

Hamlet, about to die, calls on Horatio to report his life aright. Horatio declines to take up the duty. "Here is some thing still left of the poisoned wine," he says. "I have within me more of the spirit of the ancient Romans than of the modern Danes. I shall not survive your death, but shall take away my own life and follow you "

Ancient Romans believed in committing suicide rather than surviving in disgrace. Shakespeare must have had vividly in mind the death of Brutus in *Julius Cæsar*, a play written about the time of the composition of *Hamlet*.

147. If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.

V ii. 334-337.

Hamlet is afraid that his life may be misunderstood. He is denied the opportunity of justifying himself before his contemporaries and the posterity. He wishes that Horatio should tell the truth to all. But Horatio is

not willing. He feels that he must not survive Hamlet's death and proposes to commit suicide. Hamlet here makes a final attempt to persuade Horatio to live. "If you ever held me in your heart with affection," Hamlet prays, "endure for a while divorce from happiness and continue to live in this world, however sorrowfully, to tell my story".

148. The rest is silence.

V. ii. 346.

The last words of Hamlet. The Prince means that he has nothing more to say or do and that he is passing on to the undisturbed peace and quiet of the grave. Mr. Verity quotes a comment from Moberly. "To Hamlet silence would come as the most welcome and most gracious of friends, as relief to the action-wearied soul, freedom from conflicting motives, leisure for searching out all problems, relief from the toil of finding words for thought; as the one sole language of immortality, the only true utterance of the infinite"

149. Now cracks a noble heart: good night, sweet prince;
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

V. ii 347-348.

This is Horatio's epitaph for Hamlet, the Prince whose noble heart craked under a strain too heavy for it to bear. It is significant that Horatio alludes to angels singing Hamlet to his rest. Such a reference is rare in Shakespeare and suggests that Horatio (and the poet also perhaps) was feeling that Hamlet did not get his due meed of rest in his troubled career.

150. This quarry cries on havoc.

V. ii. 352.

Fortinbras, arriving at the court of Denmark to announce the success of his expedition against Poland, meets a tragic sight. The place looks like shambles with the King and Queen, Hamlet and Læertes, all lying dead. Puzzled and bewildered he asks: "What is this sight that I see? This heap of dead bodies indicates that there has been indiscriminate slaughter."

quarry :—hunter's game, dead or alive.

havoc :—indiscriminate slaughter.

cries on :—proclaims: or alternatively, calls aloud for. In the latter case, the sentence will mean: The heap of dead bodies calls aloud for the unsparing hand of the avenger. The difficulty in accepting this interpretation is that Fortinbras cannot be expected to know yet whether there is anything to avenge. The context shows that "This quarry cries on havoc" is an expression of his first bewildered reaction to the unexpected sight that met his eyes.

151

. so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of death put on by cunning and forced cause;
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads:

V. ii 368-73.

Here is Horatio's summary of the play at the end. He tells Fortinbras and the ambassadors from England that he proposes to give a detailed account of the life and activities of Hamlet and the causes that led to the 'havoc' that they see before them. And he gives here, in advance, a synopsis of his explanation

carnal, bloody and unnatural acts :—Prof. Dover Wilson suggests that we have here in order the crimes of Claudius—adultery with Gertrude, murder of the elder Hamlet and incestuous marriage with the Queen.

Accidental judgments .—possibly a reference to the death of Ophelia.

casual slaughters .—the slaying of Polonius.

deaths put on by cunning and forced cause .—deaths instigated by cunning and the force of circumstances, probably the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who were sent to England cunningly to contrive the death of Hamlet, but whom the force of circumstances placed in the latter's hands.

The last two lines describe the clumsy attempt by Claudius and Læertes to kill Hamlet, which recoiled on their own heads.

In this upshot :—in this conclusion, in the end of the misconceived plots, which is seen here. *Upshot* is probably a metaphor from archery, being the name given to the final shot which decides a match.

CHARACTER-SKETCHES

Polonius.

"Fuller of assurance than of wisdom"—that is how Saxo Grammaticus describes the King's friend, who is the prototype of Polonius in his story. And stage tradition, while ignorant of Saxo's pregnant phrase, has nevertheless, of its own volition, depicted Polonius as a doddering old wiseacre, pompous, vain, and meddling, and meeting his doom very like the cat in the nursery tale, which was killed by its curiosity. Hamlet's sneering references have reinforced the tradition. When a man is called a fool a dozen times over, we tend to believe it. Repetition, as advertisers have learnt, has a magical influence on our minds. And when it is Hamlet who calls Polonius a tedious old fool again and again with all the eloquence at his command we are unable to screen our minds against the potent suggestion, and our views fall in with his own. And yet, if we study the text and try to see Polonius as he is, independently of the distorting medium of Hamlet's morbid mind, a very different picture emerges. Let us try to get the outlines of this picture by closely following the text.

Polonius is first presented to us in the Privy Council scene. He is the trusted counsellor of Claudius. He has evidently served under the elder Hamlet, and must also have played an important part in the *coup d'état* which secured the throne for Claudius. The King positively coos over Læertes, repeating his name thrice in four lines, (I. ii. 42-45), all because he is the son of Polonius. We meet him then in the privacy of his home, dispensing advice to Læertes and cautioning Ophelia against the advance of Hamlet. The famous precepts which he asks

his son to 'character' in his memory embody an ideal of calculated prudence which has won for Polonius the reputation of being a rank Philistine. But the homily, it has to be remembered, ends with the direction to Læertes to be true to his own self.

"And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not be false to any man" (I. iii. 78-79).

Here Polonius strikes a note to which he does not rise again throughout the rest of the play. And whenever we are tempted to think of Polonius as a dotard assuming the airs of a wiseling, we shall do well to remember the peroration with which he concluded the sermon he addressed, a little pompously perhaps, but not the less sincerely, to his son. In the rarefied atmosphere of such mountain-heights he does not dwell for long, for, immediately afterwards, he speaks to his daughter with absolute cynicism. He cannot bring himself to believe that Hamlet's intentions towards Ophelia are honourable. And he cannot trust his daughter. Hamlet may walk 'with a larger tether' than may be given her...No, she must not 'give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet'.

Polonius then absents himself from the play, while momentous happenings hold the stage and an unnatural crime is revealed in all its horror, through the aid of a supernatural agency. He comes again into the action in the back-wash of this great movement of high tension and excitement, giving us the consolation of the commonplace after our adventurous contacts with the strange and the unknown.

Once again he is in his home. And he is doing what he takes most pleasure in—giving a 'lecture', to use his own word, with a view to bring out the vastness of his wordly wisdom. Reynoldo, his servant, constitutes his audience of one, and the theme is the art of spying upon

Lærtès in Paris. He is sending his servant to give money to Lærtès. And he bids him take the opportunity to make circumspect enquiries about the kind of life the young man is leading in the gay metropolis of pleasure. Here again Polonius exhibits his cynical lack of faith in human nature. He neither expects nor desires his son to be a saint; he is preparad to make generous allowances for 'the taints of liberty'. Lærtès may well 'ply his music'. Perhaps Polonius merely wants to know what his son has been doing. Perhaps he is anxious that Lærtès should not overstep well-recognised limits in his youthful escapades. It is characteristic of the tortuous working of his mind that he should try to get the knowledge that he requires by such elaborate espionage.

Polonius now hears grave news about Hamlet from his daughter. The prince, in disordered dress, came to Ophelia's closet and left her without a word, after gazing silently at her with a look so piteous in purport, as if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors. Polonius immediately jumps to the conclusion that Hamlet is mad on account of disappointed love. He cannot imagine Hamlet being shocked by Gertrude's 'overhasty' second marriage, and he does not of course know the Ghost's story. And he has natural tendency to look upon himself as the cause of most events, a sort of Deputy Province busy arranging everything to his satisfaction. If Hamlet is mad, it must be because Polonius had bidden his daughter to refuse his advances. The Lord Chamberlain is a trifle disturbed that he should have misjudged the depth of the Prince's passion. He has cast beyond himself in his opinions. But his incorrigible self complacency does not allow him to dwell too long on this. He immediately looks ahead. The King must be told of course. It is better to face it out now than later.

Polonius straightway goes to the King and announces gleefully that he has found out the 'very cause of Hamlet's lunacy'. He whets the royal interest in his discovery by postponing its narration till Voltemand and Cornelius are received in audience and dismissed. And when the actual moment arrives for making known his discovery, he indulges in a great deal of preliminary flourish and tries to drive home his point as the climax to a thrilling tale. Hamlet is mad because he, Polonius, like a loyal servant of the Crown, has commanded his daughter to reject the Prince's advances. When the King wishes for further proofs than the single love letter from Hamlet to Ophelia which Polonius has produced, the Lord Chamberlain is a trifle nettled. He is prepared to stake his reputation as a statesman on this theory. If it proves false, let him cease to be 'an assistant to the State' and 'keep farm and carters.' He himself suggests an experiment to verify his hypothesis. He will so arrange matters that he and the King, may watch, themselves unseen, Hamlet's behaviour towards Ophelia.

Just then Hamlet is seen at a distance, and Polonius goes forward to greet him. The Prince is in a particularly bitter mood and talks with a method in his madness. He has no consideration to show for Polonius whom he looks upon as a tedious fool. Under the licence of his madness, Hamlet suggests to Polonius that he is a pimp and his daughter a prostitute. It is possible that Hamlet, having overheard Polonius suggesting his scheme to the King, takes him to task for it. Be that as it may, Polonius is incapable of understanding Hamlet's mood or his insinuation. He clutches at the repeated references to his daughter as confirming his diagnosis of the Prince's malady. He finds further evidence in his support in the song about the old Jephthah and his

daughter, with which Hamlet greets him, when he returns a while later to announce to the Prince the arrival of the troupe of actors at Elsinore.

Obsessed by his theory and unaware of the terrible forces playing around him, Polonius misses the significance of Hamlet's double-edged banter and the King's uneasy mind. The experiment which he contrives with so much labour proves a failure. When Ophelia meets Hamlet according to her father's plan, the Prince talks like one who has sensed the presence of 'the lawful espials'. He speaks to her as few men have spoken to the women they have loved. There are dark hints of regicide in his talk, which Claudius understands, but which leave Polonius all at sea.

The King is now determined to bundle Hamlet out of Denmark, but Polonius, still unwilling to admit failure of his theory, craves for one further opportunity to prove his case. The Queen, he suggests, may meet Hamlet and question him closely: he will overhear the dialogue and submit a report. The King gives his reluctant consent to the plan: but before it can be put into execution, the Playscene intervenes. Polonius is still clinging pathetically to his diagnosis. If anything, he is on the alert to secure every possible bit of evidence in his favour.

When Hamlet declines to sit beside his mother and lays himself down at Ophelia's feet saying, 'Here's metal more attractive', Polonius exclaims to the King: "Oh, do you mark that?" But the thrilling climax of the play must have left him bewildered. He probably infers a deliberate design on the part of Hamlet to insult the Queen and threaten the King, but he still tends to look upon Hamlet's activities as pranks—pranks which may be too broad to bear with, but still pranks. Noting the

displeasure of the King, he takes command of the situation and stops the play with admirable presence of mind. He then busies himself completing the arrangements for the interview between the Queen and her son, and invites Hamlet to the Queen's closet.

The interview takes place as arranged, with Polonius playing the eavesdropper. But the dialogue proceeds from the beginning on unexpected lines. Instead of Gertrude chiding her son, it is Hamlet who takes the offensive and upbraids his mother for her conduct. Frightened at Hamlet's rudeness, she cries out for help. Polonius dutifully echoes the cry from behind the arras and is stabbed to death for his pains. Hamlet runs his sword through the arras under the mistaken belief that his uncle is hiding there. So Polonius goes to his doom, with only Hamlet's, "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell," for his epitaph. A fitting end, one may think, to one who has walked the crooked paths of diplomacy all his life.

We are now in a position to estimate at its true worth the value of the stage tradition which portrays Polonius as a comic buffoon. It is possible that Shakespeare intended Polonius to serve as comic relief to the tragic tension and melodramatic suspense of the play. His habit of spreading out himself generously on all occasions lends itself to farcical interpretation. So too is his characteristic tendency to assume the role of a lecturer even when engaged in conversation. Of Gladstone the story is told that on one occasion, when he had spoken long and formally to Queen Victoria, she exclaimed: "Mr. Gladstone, I am not a public meeting". Any one who had the misfortune to be spoken to by Polonius could have uttered the Queen's remark with greater justice.

Polonius also had a most absurd faith and confidence in himself. Once he arrived at a conclusion or formed an opinion, he would not change it even in the face of over-whelming evidence to the contrary. Above all, he had a most curious desire to be directing and doing everything. He had a romantic love for stratagems and conspiracies, espionage and eavesdropping. The ways of diplomacy held him in thrall. He would spy even upon his son. He would set up his daughter as a decoy to pierce the secret of Hamlet's malady. All these are qualities which, if exaggerated on the stage, would qualify Polonius for a place in a roaring farce.

But this is by no means the whole of the story. Polonius, it has to be remembered, held a position of trust and honour in the councils of Denmark. His brain had hunted the trail of policy for long in the service of the State. Claudius says to Læertes:

“ The head is not more native to the heart
The hand more instrumental to the mouth
Than is the throne or Denmark to thy father ”

(I. ii. 47-49).

He was also held in high respect by the populace. His mysterious death creates a great sensation. And even the King has to take note of the fact that the people are

..... muddled,
Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and
whispers,
For good Polonius' death. (IV v. 64-66)

Riding on the crest of the wave of popular indignation, Læertes storms his way into the palace and threatens the person of the King himself.

Then again Polonius is deeply devoted to his children. And they reciprocate his love. Ophelia is driven mad by his death. And there is a core of very real grief to the bombast and hysteria with which Læertes reacts to his bereavement. A man so widely respected and so deeply loved by his children cannot be a 'tedious old fool.'

Polonius thus seems to be a cross between a debonair diplomat and a prancing Providence. The two strains perhaps do not mingle in perfect harmony, but we are not allowed to notice this in the overwhelming interest created by the problem of Hamlet's character. The transition from the conception of Polonius as a staid statesman to that as a senile and scheming prattler may be seen in the Reynaldo scene. In fact, Mr. Granville Barker suggests that the *raison d'être* of the scene is the necessity for providing this transition. The existence of these two strains does not, of course, make the character of Polonius a contradiction in terms.

If looked at separately, Polonius, the respected statesman, seems entirely different from Polonius, the pompous and busy meddler in others' affairs. But we are not expected to look so. And it is possible to reconcile whatever contrary element may be found in the character of Polonius by looking upon him as wise and capable within limits, in spite of his pompousness and loquacity. That is how it will probably strike a theatrical audience before whom the various facets of the Lord Chamberlain's character are flashed for brief spaces at different times.

Polonius learned his philosophy in the school of diplomacy. He had few illusions left about human nature, and he was possibly quite correct in judging the sort of men with whom he had to deal—consuls and

ministers, ambassadors and courtiers. But the craft of Claudius was beyond him, and the genius of Hamlet above his 'star.' For, beneath all his pompousness and pose, Polonius was at heart a simple-hearted old man. He was caught unwittingly in a storm of human passions and unnatural crime that let out the furies of Hell. He walked about in this unholy universe with pathetic self-complacency, when it was cracking beneath him in all its foundations. Coming unconsciously between

"the pass and
Fell incensed point of mighty opposites."

he was crushed: and by sending him to his doom thus, Destiny made him a tool for the fulfilment of her tragic purpose, the consummation of that feast of death at which Fortinbras was to gaze in awe-struck wonder. This is at once the tragedy and epitaph of Polonius.

Laertes

Lærtès serves throughout the play as a foil to Hamlet. Like a master craftsman, Shakespeare sets up before us now this facet and now that, of the characters of the young men and asks us to see and ponder and evaluate. Sometimes Hamlet attracts our sympathies and sometimes Lærtès, in strict accordance with dramatic needs. Lærtès provides a back ground against which both the virtues and weaknesses of Hamlet stand out in bold relief—his nobility of soul as well as the tragic paralysis of his will. The impression that Hamlet makes on us of being a great and heroic figure, tottering beneath a burden too heavy even for his shoulders, is due not a little to an implied contrast with Lærtès throughout the play.

From the beginning the contrast is emphasised. In the Privy Council scene, where both the young men first

appear on the stage, they stand wide apart like denizens of two different worlds. Lærtès is the son of Polonius, that venerable 'prophet of chicanery,' and is high in the favour of the King. He has come from Paris to attend the King's coronation and is dressed in the festive robes befitting such an auspicious occasion. And he comes before the King, a suppliant for permission to return to the gaiety of the French capital. Now let us look at the figure of Hamlet. Perhaps both the men are of an age, but what a contrast in mood, and manners! Sprung from a royal hero, Hamlet stands an impressive figure, dressed in the sombre robes of mourning and anxious to return to his studies in the theological and scholastic atmosphere of the University of Wittenburg. And he does not bask in the sunshine of royal grace. Claudius wins over Lærtès and packs him off to France with his blessings, but to Hamlet's suit he shows himself hostile. The Prince receives a stern lecture on loyalty and good manners and is bidden not to leave Elsinore.

We are next vouchsafed a glimpse of the home life of Lærtès. We see him here as the true son of his father, the product of 'an education presided over by Polonius and finished off in the gay capital of France.' He exhibits the same cynical distrust in human nature as his father, and like him, has unbounded faith in his own worldly wisdom. Lærtès gravely advises his sister not to believe in the passion of Hamlet. He displays equal lack of faith in the sincerity of the Prince's intentions and in her ability to guard her honour. So patronising is the homily and so derogatory to her self-respect that even the gentle Ophelia is provoked to a demure retort that the generous dispenser of gratuitous advice should not forget his own counsel. And all this free distribution of advice is done through a lecture. Lærtès has evidently inherited from his father the bad

habit of looking upon all those who listen to him as audiences to be lectured to. The sermon is cut short by the entry of Polonius who ascends the rostrum after his son. Lærtès now shows himself possessed of a ready wit which can flatter with courtly grace, by the way in which he expresses his pleasure at this unexpected meeting with his father. He then takes a 'second leave' and departs for Paris.

It may be surmised that Lærtès leads a life of care-free pleasure at the French capital, while Tragedy sets about preparing for a 'feast of death' at Elsinore. News of the sudden death of his father puts an end to his aimless pursuit of youthful pleasures. He returns to Denmark and discovers that some mystery surrounds his father's demise. Deeply attached to his father in his own way, Lærtès is anxious to avenge his death. He keeps his arrival at Elsinore secret, and plots against the King, whom he holds to be the villain of the piece. Putting himself at the head of a mob, he forces his way into the palace and challenges the King to answer for the death of Polonius.

It is here that Lærtès shines to advantage, as compared with Hamlet. Both their fathers were killed and have cast on them the duty of revenge. The degradation of his mother is an added incentive in the case of Hamlet. And yet, faced with the same problem and their wrath turned against the same person, how differently do they react. The revelation of his uncle's crime and his mother's sin comes upon Hamlet as a tremendous shock, which throws him off his equilibrium. The veil has been rent off the hidden depths of man's iniquity and the abomination that he glimpses unnerves his arm and paralyses his will. Less sensitive and more practical, Lærtès at once plunges into action. The

difficulties that stand in the way of assassinating a King do not deter him. He cheerfully dares the consequences which Hamlet, as the people's favourite and the heir apparent, would have escaped. And he thereby evokes in us the admiration which all action—and especially action in furtherance of a righteous cause—elicits.

While the King is using all his persuasive skill to soothe Læertes, Ophelia enters, her mind all undone. The fury of Læertes flares up at this tragic consequence of his father's death, and Claudius has his work cut out for him, in turning the wrath of the blood-thirsty young man against Hamlet. And once Læertes seals his compact with Claudius, he reveals the effects of his worldly training and his descent from a diplomat. "All's fair in love and war,"—and Læertes does not hesitate to use the foulest means to secure his end. When Claudius suggests that in a fencing match with Hamlet an unbated foil may be used by Læertes to gain his end, the latter is ready to anoint it with poison. His undoubted skill in fencing adds a point to the treachery he plans. And perhaps it is this readiness on the part of Læertes to forget all scruples that emboldens the King to try a second experiment in poisoning.

The news which the Queen brings at this moment of the death of Ophelia certainly does not pour oil on troubled waters. Læertes is moved, and moved deeply. Yet the defects of his unbringing and descent are clearly seen in his reaction to the death of his sister.

He is unable to put a brave face against the arrows and slings of outrageous Fortune. We can forgive the tears he sheds on hearing that Ophelia is no more, but the rhetorical extravagance with which he gives expression to his grief in the Grave Diggers' Scene offends good taste. One is tempted to suspect that it is nothing

but theatrical affection on his part, in spite of the evident sincerity of his sorrow.

Hamlet, 'most generous and free from contriving' accepts Læertes' challenge for a friendly fencing match without suspicion of any kind. He tenders a whole-hearted apology to Læertes for unwittingly bringing about the death of Polonius, and offers him his friendship. The young conspirator shows himself a perfect dissembler in his reply. For his part he is satisfied and will accept the proffered hand of friendship. But it is a question of honour, and he must have it thrashed out and settled by those competent to decide the case. And all the while, he is handling an unbated foil and envenoming its edge.

The match itself does not proceed according to plan. Læertes certainly succeeds in wounding Hamlet with the poisoned sword, but he gets repaid in his own coin. As the inevitable end draws near, he has courage enough to confess the treacherous plan for poisoning with sword and drink. Yet it is worth while noting that Læertes dies with a lie on his lips. Not a white lie such as gained for Desdemona entry into Heaven, but a weak evasion of truth in an attempt to thrust all the blame on a fellow-conspirator. And in death, as in life, this marks him sharply off from Hamlet, who has to be judged by standards other than those which confuse readiness to act and courtly accomplishments with true worth. If, as Tennyson suggested, there can be faith in honest doubt, why should there not be excellence in even tragic inability to choose and act in a moral crisis?

Ophelia.

In the evolution of the Hamlet story, Ophelia is more or less an ornamental excrescence. Her prototype

in the *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus, is a temptress and a decoy, getting a place in the plot merely as one of the means employed for testing the madness of the hero. Saxo also states that the fair temptress was an intimate friend of her intended victim from childhood. Belleforest made them lovers and they continue to be so in Shakespeare's play. Faced with the problem of keeping Ophelia attractive and likeable, while she has to bait a trap set for her lover, Shakespeare has made her colourless and self-effacing. Few of Shakespeare's tragic heroines are so lacking in spirit or individuality.

The first glimpse or at least the first adequate glimpse that we get of Ophelia is an intimate domestic scene where one may expect her to be most fully herself. Læertes is taking leave of her and as part of his farwell greeting, he lectures Ophelia on her relations with her lover. No spirited girl would have endured such gratuitous advice from her brother. Ophelia, however, plays the part of a patient listener with no stronger protest than a timid interjection whether Hamlet's was but a fleeting passion. By the time, however, that Læertes reaches the end of this discourse, even Ophelia's forbearance seems to have been exhausted and she permits herself the liberty of a demure retort. Would the dispenser of advice follow his own counsel? This is the farthest reach of her self-assertion throughout the play, and in it we have a measure of her docility. Immediately afterwards Polonius makes his appearance and Ophelia at once fades away into the background. She quietly agrees to reject the advances of Hamlet without a single expression of remonstrance or regret. And this is the more noteworthy since the sequel shows that Ophelia really did love Hamlet.

It is difficult to judge what effect Ophelia's changed attitude must have had on Hamlet. The awful revelation of the Ghost had made him a soured idealist ready to believe the worst about women. He must have looked upon Ophelia as a jilt following the fickle favours of fortune. But he makes at least one desperate effort to woo her sympathy, but she fails him at the critical moment. She is frightened rather than touched by his mute appeal for faith and understanding. Thereafter a barrier grows up between the two lovers, and Ophelia suffers in silence.

Polonius is not, however, willing to allow matters to rest here. Obsessed with the idea that unrequited love is the cause of Hamlet's distemper, Polonius wishes to watch a private conference between the lovers. The King who has his own reason for divining the cause of his nephew's ominous eccentricities, blesses the scheme. Ophelia readily, perhaps too readily, consents, at her father's suggestion, to play the part of a decoy-duck. Her behaviour may seem inexcusable, but it has to be borne in mind that she probably thought that she would be doing a service to her lover by helping to discover the truth about his malady. And in any event, she is punished far beyond her deserts.

No hero in literature has talked or has spoken with such ruthless cynicism as Hamlet does and his vile and intemperate language reduces her to all but tears. She has no doubt but that his noble and most sovereign reason is out of tune. Her suffering makes no impression on his mind. He treats her feelings with a light-hearted callousness which would be amusing in one endowed with so much nobility of mind and sensitiveness were it not for the cloud that hung over his soul. And she receives this treatment with as much submissiveness as she did her

father's command to renounce her lover. She bears no resentment against Hamlet; even when shortly afterwards in the play scene, he makes immodest jokes she is gentle and gracious. Perhaps she feels a little pleased that Hamlet should have chosen to sit beside her to watch the play. The consolation was poor enough in all conscience. But it was also marred by the embarrassment to which Hamlet's broad witticisms subjected her. However, her troubles were nearing their end. That same night Polonius is killed by Hamlet and the King deems it politic to shroud the death in mystery. That proves the last straw for her reason and she falls into the condition she pitied in Hamlet. Even Freudians will admit Ophelia's susceptibility to end in insanity, for hers is, in the language of psychoanalysis, a clear case of repressions having their delayed revenge. The poet spares her the worst suffering of all—the knowledge that her father was killed by her lover. But even without it, the cup of her agony is full; and in the artless prattle of her lunacy, she becomes a personification of pathos. Her end is not the less moving because beautiful. Surrounded by flowers and searching for them, she steps into a stream and dies. The rites with which her funeral is celebrated indicate only the malignity of Nemesis which pursued her even beyond death.

Many critics have been harsh towards Ophelia. She is by no means of heroic stature. She is submissive and pliant at the cost of her personality, and she pays the price when the most serious crisis in her life occurs. Her affection for Hamlet does not give her any insight into his mind and she fails him when he needs her most. But, as Mr. Verity asks, who does understand Hamlet? It is perverse to quarrel with this child for being baffled by genius and especially genius gone awry. And it is absurd to justify her sufferings at the punishment meted out to

her for the part she plays in the Nunnery scene. It is true that she prevaricates: but then who will not, if by some play-acting one's beloved may be restored to reason? Her statement about the whereabouts of her father is an unqualified lie, but by the time she makes that statement, she is too frightened to know what she is doing.

Horror has been expressed at the freedom of language used in one of her songs: but the very purity of her national life may have provoked this outburst of mild obscenity from her unhinged mind. Shakespeare had sufficient insight into human nature to anticipate the genesis of madness as set out by psycho-analysts who, by the way, may read improper significances even in Ophelia's preoccupation with flowers. And so even her essay in pornography is hardly a crime: even if it were an offence, she is not, by all the accepted principles of jurisprudence, responsible for it. The last charge against her is that she defies the everlasting canons against self-slaughter. All theological prepossessions apart, the verdict of the grave-diggers may be accepted.

And so, ultimately, we take leave of Ophelia in the words of the Queen, "Sweets to the sweet, farewell".

Claudius

Claudius is an admirable little study in villainy. He has not the subtlety or the depth of Iago, but his character deserves closer scrutiny than has been generally given to it. In the Privy Council scene, where he is first introduced to us, his personality is almost in the formalities of the occasion. Yet Shakespeare doubtless intended a contrast between the majestic figure of the spirit of the Royal Dane and this king of shreds and patches in physique as well as in deportment. Compared to his brother, Claudius is a mildewed ear of corn beside ripe and wholesome wheat, a 'moor' beside a 'mountain'.

Yet he must have occupied his throne with a certain amount of dignity and he has his court well under control. He has a plausible tongue and the formal announcement of his 'overhasty marriage' is in excellent study in diplomatic phrasing. Like an accomplished master of casuistry, he gives utterance to the sentiments which he considers appropriate for the occasion. He grieves for the death of his brother and thinks on him with 'wisest sorrow,' but those who are still in the land of the living have also to be remembered. So, with 'dirge in marriage' and 'mirth in funeral', he has married his sister-in-law with the full approval of his counsellors. There is just a suggestion in the reference to Gertrude as 'the imperial jointress to this war-like state, that Claudius and his supporters justified his ascension to the throne by a legal quibble.' It is clear from many places in the play that Hamlet looks upon his uncle as an usurper.

How the *coup d'état* was accomplished is nowhere related. But if the facts of the political situation are borne in mind, the skill with which Claudius deals with an egregiously embarrassing question will be better appreciated. Once this awkward issue is disposed of, the King grows confident. The diction is less laboured and words flow forth in a swifter stream. The menace from Fortinbras is stated clearly and counter-measures are promptly announced. Then, Claudius deals briefly with the petition from Læertes and turns to face another difficult problem, that of the recalcitrant Hamlet. He warily explores the new ground by a test question or two, and then admonishes his nephew for his morbid obsession with his father's death. All men have to die, fathers as well as sons, and it shows a will 'most incorrect to heaven' to 'persevere in obstinate condolment.'

Then comes the soothing announcement that Hamlet is the heir apparent. The motive perhaps is to satisfy the young Prince, if he should have ambitions. It may also be that Claudius intends the formal recognition of Hamlet's rights to sugar the bitterness of what is to follow—a curt refusal to allow the Prince to 'return to Wittenburg. Policy must have dictated this step: for the King later enunciates a maxim of some importance—

“Madness in great ones must not unwatched go”

Claudius deems it politic to make much of Hamlet's frigid acceptance of the inevitable; it is a 'gentle and unforced accord' and deserves to be celebrated by bacchanalian revelry. The King is nothing if not smooth-tongued, his soul is hidden by a perpetual mask of smile.

Then follows the Ghost's revelation of the unnatural crime. Claudius is shown up as an execrable poisoner, who does not scruple to use the foulest means for murdering a brother who trusted him. Yet to give the Devil its due, it must be admitted that even the Ghost pays a tribute to the intellectual qualities of Claudius—the witchcraft of his wit and his traitorous gifts. And it is noteworthy that the moral of this revelation appears to Hamlet to be that one may smile and be a villain. Hamlet distrusted his uncle and was wroth against his mother with all the indignation of a disappointed idealist. He feared that the appearance of his father's spirit in arms 'boded' the revelation of some crime. Yet it is clear that he did not even imagine that his uncle was the incestuous and adulterate beast he was shown to be. His smiling countenance and unctuous speech, Hamlet felt, could not hide so foul an interior. No greater tribute

can be paid to the art of Claudius in dissembling innocence.

A battle of wits between the King and his nephew ensues. Shocked by the terrible revelation, Hamlet is ready to catch at a straw to regain his faith. He does not know whether to doubt or to believe in the Ghost. And so he broods and plans and watches, waiting to spring a trap on the King at an unwary moment. Meanwhile Hamlet's melancholia leaves the King ill at ease. Suppressed ambition, the Elizabethans believed, led to a predominance of the humour of melancholy. Is Hamlet ambitious? That is the problem for the King. The formal recognition of Hamlet as the heir apparent seems to have no effect.

If anything, with the Ghost's revelation and Hamlet's assumption of the antic disposition coming immediately after, it must have seemed to Claudius, ignorant of the supernatural happenings, that his attempt to conciliate his nephew has merely stimulated the youthful eccentric to wider speech and demeanour. So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, school-mates of the Prince, are called in to probe the mystery. Hamlet sees through the game and takes an impish delight in bewildering the King. To Rosencrantz and his fellow spy, he gives a broad hint that this is a case of thwarted ambition. Polonius he fools to top of his bent, assuming the airs of a lover suffering the pangs of unrequited love. All the while the Queen is thinking that her o'erhasty marriage is at the bottom of the mischief.

Among these three theories, the King inclines in favour of the hypothesis of suppressed ambition; and he is right to the extent that his political sagacity leads

him to believe that Hamlet entertains designs against the throne. The report of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the overheard interview between Ophelia and her whilom lover confirm the King in this belief, and with characteristic presence of mind, he decides to send Hamlet to England on the pretext of demanding the neglected tribute. Very probably Claudius has at this stage no intention of encompassing his nephew's death. He does not yet know that Hamlet knows all.

He attends the Gonzago play with a view to humour his nephew and half hoping that Hamlet's interest in drama may be a sign of returning normality. He does not realise that he is infact walking into a trap. Drama, he soon learns, is no innocent diversion for Hamlet's mind. The play gives from the beginning many starts to his guilty conscience: but the climax touches him on the raw and makes him lose all control over himself. Fortunately for him, the courtiers have no suspicion of the awful truth: they look upon the King's abrupt departure from the play as indicating royal displeasure at its indecorous criticism of the Queen's marriage and its reckless threat of regicide.

The King's mind is now made up. The secret of his crime is now in the possession of Hamlet: and as he observes,

“ The terms of our estate may not endure
Hazard so dangerous as doth hourly grow
Out of his launcies ”

Hamlet must leave, quickly for England. The impossible Polonius pleads for one more chance being given to prove his theory: and the plan, made before the play, of overbearing an arranged interview between Hamlet and his mother, is allowed to be proceeded with.

And while Polonius busies himself with arrangements about his little essay in asponage, the King kneels down to pray. Hamlet's dramatic display of his exact knowledge about the manner of his father's death has shocked Claudius to the foundations of his being. And in this weak and debilitated state, what is left of his conscience tries to assert itself. The attempt at prayer does not bring him peace. The 'witchcraft of his wit' is equal to recognise that prayer is of little avail in the absence of repentance. And thriving as he is on the profits of his crime, he is not prepared to repent. It is an irony of fate that while Claudius is vainly striving to break down the barriers that exclude him from communion with God, Hamlet misses a golden opportunity for killing his uncle, deluding himself with the belief that assassination while at prayer may send the victim's soul to Heaven.

This abortive attempt at prayer evidently hardens Claudius and gives the *coup de grace* to his conscience. We hear no more of it throughout the rest of the play. Shaking off his weakness, Claudius is now ready to face any emergency. And Hamlet unwittingly plays into his hands by stabbing Polonius. The King has now a plausible reason for dealing harshly with his nephew. Hamlet is bidden to leave immediately for England—but as Claudius reveals in a soliloquy, not for a cure. He is to carry with him his own death-warrant in the shape of written instructions to the English King to have him executed.

With Hamlet safely out of the way and speeding to his death, the King must have had a brief respite from worry and anxiety. The respite comes to an end with the return of Læertes. And even while it lasted, it may have been marred by a rift in the King's conjugal life: for it has been suggested by Mr. Granville Barker that

the reference of Claudius to the tendency of love to weaken and cool off may have sprung some marked change in Gertrude's attitude towards him after Hamlet's passionate harangue in the bed-room scene.

Be that at it may, the return of Lærtès provides the King with a fresh problem and just indeed as he is reporting to the Queen rumours about Lærtès, the young man storms the palace gates at the head of an unruly mob, and rushes in like an avenging fury. In the presence of imminent danger to his life, Claudius does not lose his presence of mind. He keeps cool and calm, and by that very fact gains ascendancy over the excited and hysterical Lærtès. And once Lærtès agrees to be reasonable, it is comparatively easy for the King to clear himself of the charge of having had any hand in the death of Polonius.

At this moment, when everything seems to point to a rosy and secure future for Claudius, with Hamlet *en route* to his doom and Lærtès friendly and pacified, there comes the shattering surprise of a letter from the Prince announcing his return. 'The best laid plans of men and mice gang oft agley,' and the King's scheme for the disposal of Hamlet had gone awry. Claudius, however, rises equal to the occasion. As always, he is fertile in resource. Receiving the letter from his nephew, when on the point of boasting about having sent him to his doom, Claudius changes the drift of conversation and tries to cajole Lærtès into pursuing an unscrupulous vendetta against Hamlet. Lærtès is only too willing. The King at first, perhaps out of caution suggests a fencing match in which Lærtès is merely to use unbated foils. But the young man proves an apter pupil than the King expected, and himself suggests anointing the edge of the unbated foil with poison. Claudius is now ready to add a second string to the bow in the shape of a

cup of envenomed wine to be given to Hamlet, in case he should escape unhurt from Lærtes.

The fencing match comes off, but Fate takes a hand in the game and upsets the King's apple-cart at every stage. Hamlet in the first place proves the equal and almost the superior of Lærtes in actual sword-play. With great effort and possibly by committing a 'foul', Lærtes does indeed succeed in wounding him with the poisoned sword: but Hamlet seizes the treacherous weapon and runs Lærtes through with it. Meanwhile the Queen, heedless of mild protestations from the King, drinks off the poisoned potion intended for her son. Beyond a softly spoken aside, "It's too late," Claudius remains unmoved, he calmly allows his beloved Gertrude to go to her death. She had been his mistress during the life-time of her first husband, and afterwards his wife and not long ago, he had exclaimed.

"She's conjunctive to my life and soul
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her" IV. vii. 14-16).

Yet so clear is his intellect and so strong his nerve, that realising the futility of any effort to save her and perceiving that any such effort may incriminate him hopelessly, he exhibits no emotion and makes no attempt to help her. And when the poison begins to work on her and she falls down, he is ready with an explanation: "She swoons to see them bleed". But in the last horror-stricken minute of her life, Gertrude realises the truth and proclaims the cause of her death. And Lærtes makes a full confession. Stung to fury, and like Nemesis incarnate, Hamlet stabs his uncle. But Claudius still has hopes of retrieving his position. For once he fails to realise the fatality of poisons and makes a last desperate effort to ally the courtiers to his cause. But Hamlet supplements the poisoned sword with the

poisoned wine and ends the suspense. The King's 'foul practice' turns against himself and he falls a prey to his own diabolical devices, to sum up the plot.

There is thus no psychological subtlety about Claudius. One 'problem' character, especially if it is a Hamlet is enough for a play. The King is the conventional stage-villain, accurately and convincingly drawn. There is in this case no 'motive-hunting of the motiveless malignity'. Claudius' crimes spring from no mysterious impulses. His motives are easily read. His unflinching resource and efficient ruthlessness do not make him inhuman. Stray remnants of a conscience stir in him uneasily. He has a genuine affection for Gertrude, first his mistress and then his wife. And he has no maniacal desire to paint the world 'red' with crime. The idealist in Hamlet may have found it an unpleasant surprise that one may smile and smile and yet be a villain. But then, idealists tend to create mankind in their own image.

The Queen

Gertrude remains throughout the play more or less in the background. Shakespeare has not cared to expend much time or care in drawing up her character. Her 'o'erhasty' second marriage shows her from the beginning to be a sensual, easy-going woman with no depth of character. The Ghost's revelation in I. v. makes it tolerably clear that she was untrue to her marriage-vows even in the days of the elder Hamlet. The Queen is referred to there as 'most seeming virtuous'. The treacherous gifts of Claudius, that 'adulterate beast,' seduced her to his shameful lust. Her lust, while satiating itself in a celestial bed, was still anxious to 'prey on garbage'. Hamlet speaks of Claudius as having 'whored his mother' (V. 11. 89) and Horatio summarises the crimes of Claudius as 'carnal, bloody and unnatural acts'

(V. ii. 379), that is to say, adultery, murder and incest in chronological succession.

Gertrude's failure to see the Ghost in the bed-room scene seems to be a more or less conclusive proof of her fall from grace. But of the more heinous crime of murder of her first husband, she appears to have been not guilty. There is, it is true, no categorical denial of her participation in the crime in the generally received text of the second quarto, as in the corrupt text of the first quarto. But the Queen's evident surprise at Hamlet's reference to murder appears to be sufficient to acquit her and this is confirmed by the fact that there is not a shred of evidence to connect her directly with the murder. And, if as is generally supposed, the first quarto is a garbled version, made from a playgoer's notes and impressions, we may conjecture that the play when produced and acted under Shakespeare's directions, made at least one fairly intelligent Elizabethan think that the Queen was innocent of the murder of her husband.

Her two distinctive characteristics, as seen in the play, are her affection for her son, Hamlet, and her love for Claudius. She is as fond of Hamlet as a mother who is so different from her son can be. She does not realise how shocking her marriage with Claudius must seem to her son, who had idolised his father and loved his mother with fierce, uncompromising idealism. To her it was merely regularising an 'affair' that had gone on for years. She notices the barrier that rises up between her and her son, and watches with anxiety his growing eccentricities. His persistence in 'obstinate condolment' and his passionate disapproval of her second marriage make her a little uneasy. She half suspects the truth that the indecent haste with which she married a second husband, after the death of her first, is at the root of her son's strange distemper.

But she does not repent readily for the past. She guesses at her son's attitude in a way, but does not learn to adopt his views. Not that her conscience is as dead as that of a hardened sinner. Hamlet's violent condemnation in the bed room scene moves her: his accusation of her easy compliance with a lust which has not even the excuse of youth makes her see in her heart

"such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct."

And in the one glimpse that we have of her mind after Hamlet's departure from Denmark, we find her nervous, ill-at ease and apprehensive of some impending calamity.

But it is not clear what effect Hamlet's harangue had on her. It is true that she does not report the truth about that painful interview, and she tries as best as she can to save her son from the consequences of his indiscreet assassination of Polonius. But it is more than doubtful whether she realises in full the horror of her incestuous marriage and keeps away from the King, as is suggested by Mr. Granville Barker, on the strength of the King's moralising on the effect of time on the ardour of love.

Her love for Claudius, indeed, is as deep a feeling as she is capable of. It makes her break her marriage vows, persuades her to acquiesce in the wrongful seizure by her paramour of her son's rightful inheritance and emboldens her to brazen out before the world an incestuous alliance. In all this, of course, she merely follows the lead of the crafty and masterful Claudius: but she loves him well enough to be a dutiful camp follower. And the measure of this love can be gauged by the courage with which she tackles Læertes, when he tries to attack her beloved King. The abominable truth about

Claudius she realises perhaps only in the last minutes of her life, when she finds herself speeding to death after quaffing a cup of wine intended for her son. As the deadly poison courses in her veins, she must have recalled Hamlet's veiled insinuations and the plot of the Gonzago play and its effect on Claudius, and the truth must have flashed upon her that her second husband was not merely a drunkard and an adulterer, but a foul murderer as well, who had struck once against his brother and was now preparing to strike again against his nephew and her son. The horror of that realisation may be deemed to be sufficient punishment for her slothful and unfeeling wallowing in the mire of sensuality.

Horatio.

The strong, silent man is a peculiarly English ideal, and is supposed to be an outstanding representative of characteristic national virtues. Poets and playwrights, novelists and essayists have made us familiar with the type and lavished their praises on it. In part at least, the tenderness which English critics have displayed towards Horatio may be due to their belief that he is a monumental example of the national ideal.

But this sentimental attitude towards Horatio made them overlook a not inconsiderable flaw in his make-up, which keen-eyed Mr. Bradly has revealed to the world as a minor puzzle of the play. Horatio in the very first scene is admirably well informed of the political situation. But a few scenes later, and in the chronology of the play, after the passing of only twenty-four hours, he asks Hamlet whether celebrating drunken revelry by peals of cannon is a Danish custom. This raises the question, how are we to reconcile Horatio's evident ignorance of a common Danish custom with his intimate

knowledge of the currents and cross-currents of Danish diplomacy?

The answer is to be found, not in any psychological subtleties or textual exegesis, but in the recognition of the undoubted fact that Horatio, even though a child of Shakespeare's brain, is no more than a piece of dramatic machinery. The poet had his hands full with the character of Hamlet, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that he did not wish to be bothered more than he could help with the minor *pramatis personae*. Perhaps out of oversight, perhaps out of motives of economy, he sought to combine in Horatio the double role of a confidante to the hero and an expository Prologue. Sometimes the two functions did not combine well. In the very first scene, Horatio has to put as in possession of the initial dramatic situation. So naturally he speaks with omniscience. But in Act I Scene 5, he has to provide an opening for a homily from Hamlet on drunkenness and the weakness that mar our virtues. So, in duty bound, he professes ignorance of a common Danish custom and gives the necessary cue to Hamlet.

Shakespeare did not intend that his play should be read, re-read, analysed, and dissected in a closet. He was out to create certain impressions on his audience at the theatre, and one of these was undoubtedly verisimilitude. He certainly took care to see that his character rang true to life. Mr. Bradley's discovery notwithstanding Horatio has a convincing life-likeness about him. And it is by no means difficult to discover by what dramatic artifice this effect is achieved. For the most part, it may be noticed that Horatio is kept in the background. He speaks little, except in the opening scene, and rarely asserts himself or makes his presence felt. He appears in the play more or less as a shadow of the hero. Whenever Hamlet wants him, he is readily available.

The Prince has merely to shout 'What he, Horatio', as in III. ii. 50 and from the dark universe behind the curtain, Horatio answers the call and quickly emerges into light. And by the same token, whenever he is not required, Horatio vanishes into an ample background. (For instance, we do not know anything about him in the interval between I. v. and his entrance on the stage in III. ii.)

Even Mr. Verity, who is enthusiastic over Horatio, admits that his character "is not drawn in detail." And if this were all, there would not be much to say about Horatio. We have also therefore to note that, supplementing this deliberate sketchiness in characterisation over the greater part of the play, one finds vivid vignettes of Horatio at two or three impressive moments, when he ceases to be stage-furniture and quickens into life. We tend to forget Horatio, the Prologue, the patient listener and the provider of cues to the hero's rhetorical or moralising reflections, in the great-hearted friend, calm in mind, sparing of speech, resolute in action, and loyal even to linger on in life, when life holds no attraction for him, so that Hamlet's reputation may be handed down to posterity unblemished. And thus we have yet another of Shakespeare's feats in the alchemy of character creation—a Horatio of whom Mr. Verity can quote Sir Thomas Browne's description of the ideal confidante: "A man may confide in persons constituted for noble ends who dare do and suffer."

A fairly full character-sketch of Horatio may be found in Hamlet's description of his friend in III. ii, just before the climax of the play. Hamlet is about to confide his mousetrap to Horatio, and as preliminary to the unfolding of his plan, praises him. Horatio is 'e'en as just a man as ever his conversation coped

withal' He is not passion's slave. He has taken the rewards and rebuffs of Fortune with equal thanks. His 'blood and judgment are so well commingled,' that he is not

a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stops he please.'

And for these reasons he has been Hamlet's chosen friend.

The description is unforgettable and in the main Horatio conforms to it. He appears in the first scene of the play as a soldier gifted with abundant commonsense and sceptical of spirits and apparitions. Nothing but 'the true avouch of his eyes' convinces him of the reality of the Godst. He is courageous and quick to act. He tackles the Ghost with commendable promptitude and is ready to cross its path even though it may blast him. He tries to save Hamlet even against himself, when he wants to follow the Ghost for a private conference. And when, in consequence of that conference, Hamlet talks with hysterical excitement, Horatio quietly points out that the Prince is talking 'wild and whirling words.' He is taken into Hamlet's confidence later on, and keeps the awful secret with unshakable loyalty. Indeed, every one, when in trouble, turns to Horatio for support—the sentries on guard as well as Hamlet. And Horatio, though willing and competent to take charge of any situation, is gravely embarrassed by any enumeration of his qualities. We can imagine him, like the ideal Englishman of fiction, fidgeting and blushing, while Hamlet's eloquence paints a memorable portrait. And as soon as Hamlet comes to the point, Horatio feels relieved and assures the Prince that the King's reactions to the play shall not escape his observation. And when Hamlet's shot finds its mark and he exults hysterically in the triumph of his stratagem, Horatio is as

usual cool and efficient. He tries to soothe Hamlet's strained nerves by conventional badinage and repartee. And during Hamlet's absence from Denmark, Horatio remains at Elsinore, more or less as Hamlet's representative. He watches over Ophelia, receives messengers from Hamlet and arranges for the delivery of his letter to the King.

Underneath this never-failing equanimity and practical commonsense, there beats in Horatio a heart which could thrill with devotion and sacrifice. Even the readiness for suicide at the call of duty and friendship is revealed in the last scene. He ceases to be a mere listener from the very beginning of the scene. When Hamlet speaks of his premonition before the fencing match, Horatio comes out of his shell and pleads actively for the abandonment of the combat. He must have watched the ensuing sword-play with grave anxiety. When his worst fears are realised and his dear friend lies wounded fatally, Horatio quickly decides to do away with himself. More an antique Roman than a Dane, he raises the cup of poisoned wine to his lips. But Hamlet does not approve. He dashes the cup to the ground and bids Horatio live on, even though in pain, to defend his fair name. At the call of duty, Horatio conquers the overwhelming temptation to commit suicide. And the sweet epitaph with which he greets Hamlet's death shows the unusual depths to which he has been moved:

"Now cracks a noble heart: good night, sweet Prince
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

For this is Horatio's one and only indulgence in sentiment. And when Fortinbras arrives immediately after, Horatio is master of himself again, mindful of his duty and anxious to discharge it. He summarises, with

business-like efficiency, the string of events which culminated in the 'feast of death' which greets the eyes of Fortinbras.

"Without Horatio," says Mr. Verity, ' "*Hamlet* were a tragedy of unique depression." For it is a story of one of inhuman perfection whose dreams did not come true. If there is no fury in the infernal regions like a woman scorned, there is no more ferocious cynic than a disappointed idealist. And the play is full of a sense of frustration and futility. Hamlet's feverish activity in the last scene helps a little to dispel this miasma of depression. But even when Hamlet's pessimism is most eloquent, Horatio stands by as a silent but living condemnation of the thesis that the world is but a pestilential congregation of vapours.

Horatio supplies that standard of normality without which the play will be located in a nightmare world of incest, murder, treachery and sin. Fortinbras too has his own contribution to make in this direction, but he is a more vague and distant figure with whom we are denied intimacy. Like Hamlet, we too have learnt to rely on Horatio. When at the close of the play we view the wreckage which litters the stage on which has raged a long-drawn battle between the powers of light and darkness we feel comforted that Horatio is there to carry on. And while he is there, surely all is not lost, and the tragic world has its own silver lining.

The Part Played by Fortinbras in the Play.

Fortinbras has the distinction of being among the ballast thrown away by practically all producers of *Hamlet*. We hear of him in the very first Act as the cause of the 'post haste and romage in the land.' Ambassadors are despatched to his uncle with a request

to curb his piratical zeal in I. iii. They return in III. i. after a successful mission: the adventurous spirit of Fortinbras is turned against Poland instead of Denmark, as a result of his uncle's intervention. We have a glimpse of him in IV. iii. when he is marching to Poland. And in the last scene of all, Fortinbras succeeds Hamlet to the throne of Denmark.

The stage history of *Hamlet* amply demonstrates that Fortinbras can be 'cut' from the play without its main effect being in any way diminished or altered. But Shakespeare had certain definite purposes in introducing Fortinbras in the play. The Norwegian Prince, 'sharking up a list of lawless resolute' for any adventure that has 'stomach' in it, and ready to fight now against Denmark and anon against Poland, supplies in the first place a forcible contrast to the vacillating hero of the play, and throws in bolder relief his weakness and vacillations. The fourth scene of the fourth Act brings out this function of Fortinbras prominently.

The exploits of Fortinbras, besides, provide in some measure a somewhat exciting political background to the play. The journeys to and fro of the ambassadors and of Fortinbras serve as indications of the passage of time. Lastly, Fortinbras in the end links up the eddies of the tragedy to the placid stream of normal life. Shakespeare's invariable practice is to run on the play for some little while after the catastrophe and leave the tragic world in possession of those who will assure it a return to normalcy. And true to this bias of his, the poet leaves us in the end with Horatio and Fortinbras, men who are not supremely great like Hamlet but who are symbolical of the calm that arrives after the storm and stress of the tragedy.

The terrible evil in the tragic world has been expelled and expelled at the sacrifice of much that is great and good. What remains behind is something like the world of ordinary, free at once from the evil that calls for such mighty efforts to subdue it and the towering greatness that takes up the challenge and perishes in its victory.

Shakesperean Tragedy

Tragedy, roughly defined, is a tale of suffering represented on the stage. Like most things of value in European culture, it is of Greek origin. The term originally meant, in classical antiquity, 'goat song' and scholars have continued to wrangle on the light that etymology throws on the early history of the art. It is enough for our purposes to note that religion was the nurse and probably the mother of drama in Greece as elsewhere and that the development of Greek tragedy from Aeschylus to Euripides shows its gradual growth from a state of partial vassalage to religion to freedom and independence as a form of artistic expression.

The theme of the tragedy may have been originally determined by its association with the worship of the dead. Except in very few instances, Greek examples of the art deal with the lives of 'heroes' or 'heroines' of old mythology. Compelled by tradition to treat of legends enshrining the outgrown moral standards of ancient gods and goddesses, the tragedians of classical Greece took it as their duty to justify the ways of their gods to contemporary reason and conscience.

The lines were thus laid down which distinguish Greek tragedy—and the highest European tragedy as well—from other forms of dramatic art. Its essential

feature is that it tells with grave seriousness a story of suffering, induced by some conflict between the sufferer and some internal or external force, and stimulating the discussion of universally applicable moral problems.

It is a *sine qua non* of the art that the suffering must, for the sufferer, remain uncompenstated, or at least inadequately compensated. Nevertheless, tragedies give us a high degree of æsthetic pleasure, and the reasons therefor have set the curious wondering down the ages. Aristotle described the effect of tragedy as 'katharsis', a purgation of our emotions. All great tragedies do not end in mere frustration or futility. They contain an element of reconciliation, creating an impression that the hero, "though in one sense and outwardly he has failed, is yet in another sense superior to the world in which he appears; is in some way, which we do not seek to define, untouched by the doom that overtakes him and is rather set free from life rather than deprived of it"*.

Shakespearean tragedy, in the main, conforms to this pattern. Its distinctive features were, however, the result of historical causes. Elizabethan tragedy, of which Shakespeare's work was the finest flower and fruit, arose out of a confluence of two streams of influence, one hailing from Greece and reaching England through the play of the Roman, Seneca, and the other springing from the mysteries and moralities of native English drama.

The plays of Seneca cannot compare in point of merit with the tragedies of Greece and are important primarily for the effect they had on Renaissance drama in Europe. Often rhetorical and insincere in sentiment,

* Bradley's Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 324.

full of literary artifice in style, and sensational and melodramatic in plot and action, they revealed to the English playwrights of the sixteenth century, a new drama with an almost mechanical division into five acts and a ready-made apparatus of choruses, gods, ghosts, furies, messengers, and the like, for producing startling and blood-curdling effects*. Yet it must be said to their credit that the Senecan plays showed the possibilities of dramatic construction and by their example laid the foundations for the wide range and almost universal scope of the Elizabethan drama

The mysteries and miracles of indigenous tradition, dealing with the epic narrative of the Bible, determined the romantic bias of the sixteenth century drama. Most of the plays of the period¹ were dramatised romances, constructed according to no canon excepting the dictates of the artistic conscience of the playwright. The immense variety of characters and their location in a practically limitless range of space and time, which are marked features of the Elizabethan drama, were inherited from the national pastime of dramatising the story of creation and the history of the universe as related in the Old and the New Testaments. Yet another legacy from the past was the indiscriminate mingling of the grave and the gay which is found in the plays of the spacious days of good Queen Bess. English audiences acquired a taste for tragedy by witnessing frequent representations of the passion of Christ on the stage. The Moralities accustomed them to psychological analysis of character.

It was in such a historical *milieu* that the genius of Shakespeare budded and blossomed and bore fruit. He

¹ See Senecan influence.

wrote his tragedies, which are among the highest products of European drama, for audiences whose dramatic tastes had been hereditarily nurtured by the loose texture and generous scope of the mysteries and miracles and whose minds were filled with exaltation by the new heaven and earth opened up by the discoveries of explorers and the students of classical learning. His departure from classical tradition is as complete as his achievement is undoubted.

Shakespearean tragedy can be understood and appreciated only if its independence as a distinctive art form is recognised. It is not necessary for this purpose to enquire whether Shakespeare wrote in accordance with preconceived theories of writing his tragedies. Shakespeare has provided us with materials for investigation and analysis. And the challenge has been adequately met by Professor Bradley whose monumental lectures on *Shakespearean Tragedy* display an insight and a patient thoroughness rarely surpassed or even equalled in the history of literary criticism.

Looked at externally, Bradley points out, a Shakespearean tragedy is "a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate". Here are some of the raw materials for producing the tragic effect. If an apparent *petitio principii* may be forgiven, a tragedy may be called a play which produces on our minds a tragic effect. That is to say, it arouses in our minds certain well-defined emotions which we recognise as tragic grief, anger, terror, pity and so forth. Shakespeare generally seeks to produce this effect, whether by design or by accident, by representing exceptional calamity overtaking a hero of 'high degree' and with its consequences extending far beyond him-

The calamity, however, does not merely happen: it is produced by characteristic actions on the part of the hero. It is an essential factor of Shakespearean tragedy that the hero himself contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes. No malignant fate constitutes the only villain of the piece. Supernatural elements never play a compulsive part. Accidents enter into the scheme of action, but never as dominating factors, weakening the 'causal connection of character, deed and catastrophe.'

And actions of dramatic importance are never made to spring from abnormal state of mind. Shakespeare takes pains to indicate that the hero's character in a large measure determines his destiny. He is invariably an exceptional being, towering above the average men and women around him. Endowed with genius or built on a grand scale, he evokes admiration or awe. At the same time he has a fatal tendency to be one-sided. The play is so contrived that "in the circumstances where we see the hero placed, his tragic trait, which is also his greatness, is fatal to him. To meet these circumstances, something is required which a smaller man might have given, but which the hero cannot give. He errs by action or omission, and his error joining with other causes brings on him ruin."

The fall of the hero never leaves us depressed or desperate. No Shakespearean tragedy is a sordid tale of meanness and misery, representing mankind as contemptible. The great qualities of the hero give us a vision of the possibilities of human nature. There is certainly an impression of waste, but the waste is after all in a good cause. (And moreover, without creating this impression of waste, the tragedian cannot do his business at all) For Shakespeare's tragic world is a "world travelling for perfection, but bringing to birth together

with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only with self-torture and self-waste."

The poet does not deal out what is known as poetic justice in his plays: but he does not represent the ultimate power which guides the destinies of his characters as being indifferent to the moral law. There is resolute and successful resistance to evil, but the success is achieved at the enormous sacrifice of the good. In this, Shakespearean tragedy does not conform to the theory of Hegel, who suggested that the essence of tragedy is a conflict between two principles, each good in its own right.

Senecan Influence.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 B. C. to 65 A. D.), noted Roman Stoic, playwright and statesman, left behind him ten tragedies which exercised a decisive influence on Renaissance Drama in Europe. Seneca wrote his plays in imitation of the Greek writer Euripides whom he admired as a kindred spirit. They were purely literary productions and never meant for the stage

Seneca was first the tutor and later the chief adviser of Emperor Nero. From this position of vantage, he surveyed the Roman world and became struck with its wickedness and stupidity. Revolting against the sleek and pampered vice of the Roman Empire, Seneca felt the rebel spirit in Euripides congenial. Euripides wrote of the Greek gods and goddesses as a thorough-going sceptic and reduced to the human level the stature of the divine. Seneca took his themes from the Greek mythology. As he was a Roman, the Greek deities could not receive his homage. Being a Stoic, he even did not believe in the Roman gods.

Seneca's plays were thus an unbeliever's imitations of a sceptic's tirade against the gods he was called upon to believe in. Seneca's unbelief, however, was a somewhat pale-blooded thing. He seldom had the courage to follow his own precepts. He must have abhorred, for instance, Nero's murder of his mother. Yet he wrote the official justification for the matricide. He was again a Stoic, who preached throughout his life a heroic acceptance of the inevitable as the wisest of philosophies. Yet when Nero condemned him to death in the end, he forgot his own counsel and piteously pleaded for his life.

Here lies perhaps the clue to the artificiality and insincerity of Seneca's plays. They are full of false emotion and unreal characters. Interest is attempted to be created by sensationalism and melodrama. Murder, accident, and sudden death, ghosts and furies and malevolent spirits constitute the principal machinery of his plays. The dialogue is stilted and unnatural, rhetoric and extravagance doing duty for feeling and passion. The partiality of the Elizabethans towards 'blood and thunder' tragedies full of rant and bombast may in part be traced to the influence of Seneca.

In spite, however, of these defects, Seneca had outstanding qualities. He showed the Elizabethans the possibilities of dramatic as opposed to epic construction. The brilliance of his literary style provoked imitation and led to the application of literary standards to drama. His plays surveyed a wide range of human life and the sentiments that he expressed were seldom parochial. In spite of his adherence to the precepts laid down by Aristotle and Horace, he made possible a genuine romantic tragedy, when his influence met and chastened the tradition of the mysteries and moralities.

Early in the fourteenth century, Italy began the study and later the imitation of Seneca. His influence then spread to France and later still to England. The first effect of the study of Seneca in England was the composition of Latin tragedies in imitation. This was followed by the translation of his plays into English, nine of them finding an English version between 1559 and 1566.

At the same time original plays in England on the Senecan model were being written. *Gorboduc* by Sackville and Norton (1561) led the list and was followed by *Jccasta* (1566) attributed to Gascoigne, and other plays of a similar type which interested only academic circles. Another direction, even more important, in which Senecan influence was felt, was on the course of the development of popular drama. Edward's *Damon and Pythias* (circa 1564) is the earliest play which shows the result of the application of artistic principles derived from a study of Seneca on the 'interludes' of the period. To this type belong Pickering's *Horestes* (printed in 1567) Preston's *Cambyeses* (1569) and *Appius and Virginia* (1575) and such other interludes struggling to become real plays.

Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* is the first artistic tragedy, inspired by Seneca, but constructed on freer lines. Its theme is Senecan, but the treatment, except for the unity of action and deliberate contrivance of dramatic effects, notably departs from the rules of classical decorum. There is plenty of action, even violent action, and the device of reporting by messenger important business as transacted off the stage is given up. In the succeeding decade or two there was a regular riot of tragedies of blood—Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, Tournieur's *Revenger's Tragedy*, etc. But it is

unnecessary for the purpose of this essay to survey them.

It is not without significance that there is widespread speculation, based on plausible inferences, about a lost *Hamlet* play by Kyd. And at first sight, regarded purely from the point of view of the plot, there is much in *Hamlet* that reminds us of Kyd, and more distantly of Seneca. The story involves a number of violent deaths, and there is the inevitable ghost. Indeed the ghost in the old *Hamlet* play appears to have become notorious. Its cry of "*Revenge, Revenge*" become a by-word among the wits of the day. In its insistence on revenge, it might have been Senecan in origin: but the so-called Senecan spook in Elizabethan tragedies was full of crudities. The ghost of the Royal Dane in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a revolutionary creation based on the popular superstitions and theological prejudices of his day*. Shakespeare has felt here the influence of Seneca only to the extent of making his ghost a minister of revenge.

Not merely in the matter of the ghost, but in the treatment of the whole plot, Shakespeare is thoroughly original and creative. He transformed a Punch and Judy melodrama into a wonderful psychological study of frustrated genius. If Seneca is for Shakespeare 'heavy', that is grave and serious, the plays which imitated Seneca and succeeded only in being full of bombast excited only his ridicule. Says Falstaff, "*I Must speak in passion, I'll do it in King Cambyeses' vein*", alluding to the Senecan interlude *Cambyeses*.

What then is the extent of Seneca's influence on Shakespeare? The choice of themes may owe some-

* For a fuller discussion of this subject, vide *Supernatural Element*.

thing to an interested reading of the Latin playwright. Seneca's example again must have encouraged the use of the super natural. It has also been pointed out that Shakespeare makes occasional use of a device familiar to students of Greek tragedy and Seneca—rapid dialogue in alternate lines (e. g., *Richard III.*, IV iv.) Then again, Seneca is notable for his sententious precepts and aphorisms and Shakespeare is full of these. *Macbeth*, for instance, contains several passages, which seem like reminiscences of Seneca. The 'Murder of Gonzago' comes nearest the spirit of Seneca in the grave sententiousness of its style. Lastly, and above all, Seneca taught the Elizabethans and might have taught Shakespeare the meaning of artistic unity in drama. The romantic tragedy of the Elizabethan age is Senecan tragedy freed from its bondage to the rules of classical decorum and exploring the whole gamut of human passion and crime.

The Text of *Hamlet*

Not the least of the causes for the puzzling obscurity of *Hamlet* is the lack of an authentic text. At least four versions dating from the lifetime of Shakespeare are known. Two of these, the First Folio of 1623 and the Second Quarto of 1604, form the basis of the *textus receptus*. A third, the German *Brudermorde*, is so debased as to be hardly recognised as a genuine scion of the original stock. Lastly there is the First Quarto of 1603 which ever since its discovery in 1821 has remained one of the standing riddles of criticism.

It is generally believed that the two main authorities for the modern text of *Hamlet* are derived from different originals. In addition to variations in readings, the texts of the Second Quarto and the First Folio show also other and more considerable differences. The Quarto has about 220 lines not found in the Folio,

and the latter has in turn some eighty-five lines absent from the former. The character of these omissions gives us some idea about the relative authenticity of the two texts. Not a few of the omissions in the Folio appear to be 'cuts' for the stage purposes. Passages difficult to follow or unnecessary for action are deleted. To the former class belong the famous lines about the '*dram of eale*' in I. iv and the King's lament over the transitoriness of passion in IV. vii. The description of the death of Cæsar in I. i and the conversation about Fortinbras in IV. iv. are examples of passages omitted because they do not contribute to the main movement of the play.

Most of the omissions from the Quarto, however, appear to be for special purpose. The reference to Denmark as a prison in II. ii was probably excised in deference to Anne of Denmark, wife of James I, and the attack on 'eyrie of children' in the same scene was probably cut out as the boy actors had become the 'children of the Queen's Revels, in 1604. It has therefore been inferred that the Folio is more theatrical and less literary than the Quarto. Gollancz points out that the Quarto version is 'essentially more valuable' though the Folio 'contrasts with it favourably in the less important matter of typographical accuracy'.

Professor Dover Wilson, in his recently published *Manuscripts of Shakespeare's Hamlet* has endeavoured to show that the Folio was probably printed from a transcript made in 1622 or 1623, from 'the Globe prompt-book, which though itself, in all probability taken direct from Shakespeare's manuscript, had been edited in a more or less high-handed fashion' and that the transcript was probably made by 'a slovenly play-houses scribe, who, to save himself the trouble of keeping his eye constantly on the prompt-book before him, trusted to a

treacherous memory of the play as he had seen it performed'.

The importance of the Quarto is due not merely to its partiality for literary and philosophic passages, but also to the formal claim put forward on its behalf on the title page that it was 'newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much again as it was, according to the true and perfect Copie'. This claim had evidently to be made on account of the publication a year earlier of the First Quarto, which is here by implication shown up as a 'pirate'.

There are many vital differences between the First and the Second Quartos, and a study of these differences upholds the claim of the Second Quarto for authenticity. In the first place, the First Quarto runs only to 2143 as against the 3719 lines of its successor. This diminution in length is due in the main to the omission or mutilation of many passages found in the Second Quarto, those with philosophical thought or endowed with imaginative splendour suffering most. The famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, for instance, suffers a most remarkable transmutation, which, to quote a line therefrom 'puzzles the brain and doth confound the sense'.

In the second place, there can be little doubt that the First Quarto is badly edited and very carelessly printed. Words and phrases are maimed and mutilated, and even the division into metrical lines suffers. Verse, even rhymed verse, is printed as prose and prose as verse. Proper names suffer a sea-change into something queer and grotesque. Plato takes the place of Plautus, Oosell of Ossa. The "*Hyrceanian beast*" appears as the "*arganian beast*", and Roscius as Rossions.

There is difference too in the very structure of the play. The order of scenes is different. The Nunnery

scene follows immediately on the suggestion of the Chamberlain that he and the King should spy upon an interview between Hamlet and Ophelia, and the 'fishmonger' episode comes next. There is also an entire scene in the First Quarto for which there is no counterpart in the Second, a scene between the Queen and Horatio, of which more will be said presently.

Then again, the characters in both the Quartos do not bear the same names. Polonius and Reynaldo are called in the First Quarto as Corambis and Montano; Claudius appears anonymously as the King, Osric as a braggart gentleman' and Francisco as the second of two Sentinels'. The King and Queen of the play within the play are a Duke and Duchess in the First Quarto and the Duke's name is Albertus instead of Gonzago. Lastly there are differences in characterisation and incidents and facts. The Queen's innocence of the murder of her first husband is expressly declared in the First Quarto:

" But as I have a soule, I swears by heaven
I never knew of this most horride murder".

She even tries to assist Hamlet in the prosecution of his revenge. In the scene between Horatio and the Queen already referred to she is informed of the contents of Hamlet's letter to Horatio, and through him, she sends Hamlet a message of encouragement and hope. Claudius is in the First Quarto a greater and subtler villain. He often addresses Hamlet as 'sonne' and 'dearest sonne,' and it is he who suggests the device of the poisoned sword to Læertes. As examples of variations in incidents and facts, mention may be made of the statement in the grave-diggers' scene, of Yorick's skull having been in the grave for twelve years in the First Quarto as against twenty-three in the

Second, and of Lærtes being represented as having come to Elsinore not for the coronation of Claudius but for the funeral of the late King.

Differences such as these between the two Quartos clearly show that the First Quarto was an unauthorised version. It was a common method in Shakespeare's time to publish editions of popular plays by taking shorthand notes during their performance. Gollancz quotes Heywood's prologue to his "If you know me not, you know nobodie" to show the wide prevalence of this piracy.

"(This) did throng the Seats, the Boxes and the Stage
So much, that some by Stenography drew
The plot; put it in print: (scarce one word
trew)."

But the outrage on Shakespeare's copyright is not the whole of the story. Roughly speaking there are three theories trying to account for the differences between the First and the Second Quartos. It has been suggested that the First Quarto is nothing more than an unauthorised compilation from stenographic notes of the Second Quarto. The difficulty facing this hypothesis is that it fails to account for the differences in characterisation and names, and the variations in the order of the scenes, and in incidents and facts.

Another view is that the First Quarto is a first sketch by Shakespeare, later improved into the Second Quarto. If this first sketch is the Hamlet play concerning which allusions abound from 1589, there are almost insuperable difficulties in attributing it to Shakespeare. And so the explanation generally accepted is to the effect that the First Quarto is a garbled version of a *Hamlet* in transition. It is suggested that the First Quarto represents the old play after it had been

retouched by Shakespeare to a certain extent, and that the result of his final revision is to be seen in the Second Quarto.

Here too there are certain difficulties. Dowden points out: "The general style of the *Hamlet* of 1603 is much more like the style of a play of Kyd's and Marlowe's time." But still there is what we may call a definitely un-Shakespearean element in the First Quarto which has to be accounted for. This may represent a survival from the old play, not yet subject to Shakespeare's alchemy, Or, as Verity suggests, the First Quarto might have been compiled from shorthand notes taken at a performance and "after-wards put together by some theatrical hack-writer, who supplemented the deficiencies of the shorthand report by speeches of his own composition in which he sought to carry on the general drift and style of the piece and in which he might have made use of the plot of the pre-Shakespearean *Hamlet*."

Little need be said of the German *Brudermord*. The earliest manuscript is dated 1710. But it is on record that a Hamlet play was staged in Dresden in 1626. In giving the name of Crambus to Polonius and in several details it links up with the First Quarto, but it is of very little use in determining the text of the play.

The Time Scheme of the Play.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Shakespeare did not care to work out detailed or coherent time-schemes for his plays. He throws out here and there in his plays suggestions indicating the passage of time, but very little effort is taken to bring these scattered suggestions together in an ordered schedule. At the same time, it is due to the poet to say that no one witnessing

the performance of any play of his on the stage is likely to notice any tricks with time. Microscopic analysis in the study brings these discrepancies to light: but in the impressions that are thrust on us in swift succession when watching a play, we are conscious only of the movement of the plot and the passage of time, and are hardly ever allowed to pry too curiously into the liberties that the poet takes with time.

The most glaring example of Shakespeare's cavalier treatment of old Father Time is found in *Othello*. But even in *Hamlet*, as we shall presently see, there are hints that the time scheme cannot stand too meticulous an examination. A hypothesis has been put forward that Shakespeare employs an artistic device involving the use of two parallel time-schedules, one real and the other dramatic, and that 'dramatic time is used for reinforcing suggestions of quick movement.' An alternative explanation is that Shakespeare, 'who always wrote in a hurry and never blotted out a line,' was deliberately careless in matters which were not likely to disturb his audiences. It is not, however, necessary to pursue these questions further, as they are not raised prominently by *Hamlet*.

A convenient starting point for the chronology of the events of the play is the murder of the elder Hamlet. It is true that this murder does not take place in the play, but nonetheless it affords an easy point of reference for fixing in time the incidents of the play. The first scene may be supposed to take place some two months after the death of the elder Hamlet. For the morning after the first scene of the play, Hamlet says that his father is 'not two months dead' (I. ii.138). The season appears to be spring or early summer. It is still cold enough to provoke comment from the sentries ("It's bitter cold I. 1.

but Ophelia's flowers in the fourth Act indicate that

the month is June. In between there must have elapsed, as will be presently seen, not less than two, and not more than four months.

On the next morning, we have the second scene. For Horatio, Marcellus and Bernado proceed straight from their watch to report the visit of the ghost to Hamlet. Horatio says expressly: "My lord, I think I saw him yesternight". (I. ii. 188) And immediately after, or almost simultaneously, we have the third scene of the first Act. Læertes returns from the Privy-Council, packs and takes leave of Ophelia. The fourth and fifth scenes of the first Act take place on the succeeding night. Hamlet fixes the tryst on the 'haunted platform' between 'twelve and one' the same night in I. ii. (251) and it is not yet or is just twelve when the fourth scene commences. (Cf. I. iv. 3-4). Act I. Sc. v is merely a continuation of the preceding scene.

The interval between Acts I and II is determined by a passage in the play scene, (III. ii. 116—9), which refers to the death of the late elder Hamlet. "What should a man do but be merry?" asks the Prince: "for, look you, how cheerfully my mother looks and my father died within these two hours." Ophelia gently corrects him: "Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord". Since Act I commences some two months after the death of the elder Hamlet, Act III takes place some two months later. And from Act III, Sc. ii, we have to trace our way backwards to Act II; Act III Sc. 1. takes place on the morning of the day on which the play is enacted. Rosencrantz tells the King:

"And, as I think they have already order
This night to play before him.....".

(III. i. 20—21).

Act II, Sc. 2 takes us to the preceding day. For Hamlet then fixes up the play 'for to-morrow night' (III. ii. 517). The interval between this scene and the preceding one cannot be more than a few hours at the most. For in II. i. Polonius assures himself that he has found out the "cause of Hamlet's lunacy and decides immediately to report to the King." And it is not in him to delay when he has news of such importance to deliver. In II. ii, the actual report is made to the King. Between these scenes, therefore, only so much interval may be allowed as will be necessary for Polonius to proceed from his house to the palace.

Thus from the commencement of Act II to the end of the ply-scene, we have just two days. And as the play-scene takes place four months after the elder Hamlet's death, the events of Act II follow the events of Act I after an interval of about two months. Quite apart from the specific time-reference made by Ophelia, there are several indirect suggestions confirming the passage of atleast a few weeks between Acts I and II. The dialogue between Polonius and Reynaldo in II. i, shows that sufficient time must have elapsed for Læertes to go to Paris and spend all the money he took with him. In II. ii, the ambassadors return from Norway after completing a political mission. After the assumption by Hamlet of an 'antic disposition' in I. v., the King has had time to grow uneasy and to send for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy out the secret. These two school fellows of Hamlet arrive at the court in II. ii. The cumulative effect is to suggest the passing of a few weeks, and matters are made clear and precise by Ophelia's statement in III. ii.

Hamlet is requested at the end of III. ii to go immediately to his mother's chamber. The next scene takes place while he is on his way to the Queen's apartments.

Act III. Sc. iv. is laid in the Queen's chamber and must follow immediately after the preceding scene. The fourth Act begins a few minutes later. Prefacing a description of the assassination of Polonius, the Queen exclaims in IV. 1: 'Ah, mine own lord, what have I seen tonight!' (IV. 1. 5). The next two scenes follow in quick and immediate succession. Hamlet is despatched to England the same night, and in the next scene, on his way to the ship, meets a captain from the army of Fortinbras. From Elsinore to the sea is no great distance, and we may suppose that Hamlet's meeting with the Norwegian captain occurs on the day succeeding his departure from Elsinore.

Between IV. iv. and IV. v. there is an interval variously estimated at periods ranging from a week to two months. In IV. v. Læertes storms the palace at the head of a seditious mob. Before things can come to this pass, sufficient time must have elapsed to allow for news of the death of Polonius to reach Læertes at Paris, for Læertes to return thence to Elsinore in secret, and for a subterranean agitation against the King by him to advance so far as to enable him to make a more or less open attack against the palace. The death of Hamlet, which, as we shall see, happens two or three days later, synchronises with the return of Fortinbras from Poland after a successful campaign and the arrival of ambassadors from England reporting the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

It is difficult to see how all these things can take place in anything less than two months. Yet there are definite indications in the play that the period is very much less. Hamlet says in his letter to Horatio (IV. iv) "Ere we were two days old at sea, a private of very warlike appointment gave us chase". He was, as the letter says, caught by the pirates, who however, proved

themselves 'thieves of mercy' and landed him in Denmark. So between the receipt of this letter by Horatio and the departure of Hamlet, we must allow at least one day for Hamlet to reach the ship, two days at sea before capture of pirates, another two days at least for return to Denmark and not less than a day again for the latter to reach Elsinore, in all, not less than six days and probably not more than eight or nine days.

And within this short interval, all the events supposed to take place between IV. iv. and IV. v. could not have taken place. Here is clearly a discrepancy, but it is not such as is likely to be noticed when seeing or even when reading the play.

The contradictions appear only when, with watch in hand, we investigate the time-scheme of the play. There is no imperative necessity to bring in here a theory of 'double time' to account for the conflicting indications about the lapse of time. It is enough to note in explanation that while Shakespeare had to crowd in the concluding events of the tragedy, he also probably wished to give an impression of the swift movement of events towards the catastrophe.

Once the interval between IV. iv. and IV. v. is fixed, it is easy to follow the order of the events that succeed. The last scene of the fourth Act (IV. vii) must have come in immediately after the attack on the palace in IV. v. There has been only just sufficient time for the King to prove to Lærtès who was responsible for the death of Polonius. An interval of twenty-four hours may be allowed. This scene must have occurred immediately after IV. vi. Horatio must have arranged for the immediate delivery of Hamlet's letter to the King, which is referred to in IV. vi. and the King receives the letter in IV. vii. The death of Ophelia is

reported in the same scene. The inquest and funeral must have come within two or three days of her death, an interval which is also sufficient to account for Horatio to go to Hamlet's hiding place and for them both to return to Elsinore to meet the funeral cortege of Ophelia in V. 1. Act V. Sc. 11. cannot be separated by a long interval from the preceding scene. Hamlet is still telling the adventures of his journey to Horatio in V. 11; he speaks of the fight with Læertes as though it were recent.

We may now summarise our conclusions and draw up a time-scheme of the play thus, noting the 'land-marks' as we pass.

Two months before the play—death of the elder Hamlet.

Act. I. Sc.	1.	Two months later (Midnight)
„	11	Next morning.
„	111.	Same day
„	1v. & v.	Same midnight.

Interval: Two months (The play-scene takes place four months after the death of the Elder Hamlet.)

Act II. Sc.	1	} Same day.
„	11	
„ III. Sc.	1	} Same night.
	11	
	111	
	1v	
Act. IV. Sc.	1	} Same night.
	11	
	111	

Act. IV. Sc. iv. Next day.

Interval—a week (or two months).

Act. IV. Sc. v.

vi. Next day

vii. Same day

Act. V. Sc. 1 Two or three days later.

„ 11. Next day.

The Comic Element in *Hamlet*

Shakespeare inherited through the mysteries and moralities of the native English drama, a tradition that gloried in the indiscriminate mingling of the grave and the gay. The strict classical separation between tragedy and comedy is really found in Elizabethan drama. Popular taste might have determined the issue, but the dramatist must also have found some decided advantages in the practice. A tragedy is meant to evoke in us painful feelings, and the dramatist has to set about the business with care and circumspection. The catastrophe must overwhelm us, but it must not be an outrageous shock. It must be prepared and led to. This preparation must not, however, consist of one continued movement of unrelieved and accelerating tension, for no audience can live on an unmixed diet of high and grievous excitement. To tend our nerves and sustain our interest, Shakespeare generally uses the device of alternating scenes of high with those of low emotional pitch. And it is in these latter that humour generally finds its legitimate place. The interval between the crisis and the catastrophe particularly provides scope for the employment of comic relief so as to afford variety and heighten by contrast the tragic feeling to be presently evoked.

Hamlet as a whole is a play of sombre magnificence. It is exclusively dominated by the hero, and he is from the beginning in a morbid state of mind. There is no room in the scheme of the play for good-natured fooling. Even the humorous element has to be subordinated to the dominant tone of the play. Shakespeare therefore provides such comedy as the play contains mainly by the hero's biting sarcasms. Occasionally, the humour grows macabre, as in Hamlet's speculations about the *post-mortem* vicissitudes of the body of the Polonius, compared with which even the hardened jests of the grave-diggers seem healthy. There is joyous laughter only in Hamlet's happy talk with the actors and his spirited badinage with Osric, 'the water-fly'

Polonius, as generally played, is a comic figure, but it is by no means certain whether Shakespeare intended him to be so. Even if Polonius is the clown of the play—the old texts only describe the grave-diggers as clowns—his creation is no example of kindly humour, for it cannot be an unmixed pleasure to contemplate 'dotage encroaching on wisdom' or self-conciet and an instinct for intrigue doing duty for intelligence.

Hamlet's wit then is the chief comic element in the play. It finds expression for the most part in puns and quibbles. Indeed, at times it seems as though quibbling is a habit oft hought with Hamlet. What Dr. Johnson wrote of Shakespeare applies with more justice to Hamlet—that quibbling was to him "the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it." It is part of Hamlet's malady that while his power to act is paralysed, his intellect functions with its usual strength. He cannot throw off the load on his shoulders save through action: but as this is denied him, he

apparently tries to derive vicarious satisfaction by engaging in verbal duels. And it is in such contests that we find, for the most, examples of Hamlet's wit. It scintillates with hard brilliance: its angry flashes form throughout the greater part of the play the only gleams of light in a dark sinister universe.

Hamlet's talk with the King is deliberately puzzling and provocative. From the first comment in an aside,* "A little more than kin and less than kind" (I. ii) to the last bitter, "Is thy union here?" (V. ii) Hamlet quibbles and puns with the King often in seeming madness, but never without a sharp edge in what he says. Polonius he treats with contempt, playing before him the part of a lover turning mad through jilted love. With Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is at first friendly—witness the jokes about Fortune's favours—but after worming out their secret, he is crafty, and occasionally openly hostile.

Hamlet's assumption of 'the antic disposition' gives him unlimited freedom to quibble and satirise. A touch of lunacy excuses offensive bad manners and soothes suspicions that may be raised by openly avowed ill-feeling against the King. There are three theories put forward to explain Hamlet's eccentricities, one by Polonius, another by the King, and the third by the Queen; and Hamlet contrives with admirable wit and skill to give point and support to each one of them. Before the King and his spies, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet pretends to be suffering from thwarted ambition. To Polonius he is the jilted lover. His persistence in wearing mourning and his silent disapproval of his mother's remarriage must have furnished to the court sufficient evidence in favour of the Queen's theory that

* Vide Annotations for a full explanation of the quibble.

his father's death and her overhasty wedding with Claudius are at the root of his distemper.

It may be noted that Hamlet's assumption of madness did not lead him to talk inconsequential nonsense. Many of his remarks, it is true, do not make sense. Their point eludes us. But that is no reason why we should suppose that Shakespeare intended them to be nonsense. He had the reputation in his days of being one of the wittiest of playwrights. And just as the conversation in *Love's Labour's Lost*, or the duels in wit between Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* seem flat or ununderstandable, Hamlet's wit also seems obscure or nonsensical. "But," as Prof. Dover Wilson points out, "many of the sallies intended to delight and at times to nonplus the wits of Bankside or Blackfriars have become merely bewildering after three centuries of change in the language, and with the talk of the town—that amalgam of back-chat, topical allusion and passing *cliche*—faded beyond recall."

In Osric Shakespeare satirises the affected language and Euphuistic fashion of the Elizabethan courtier. Hamlet plays the game even better than Osric and leaves him gasping. We can in a general way appreciate the joke at the expense of a ridiculous and pompous jargon, but as Euphuism is out of date, the flavour of the wit has been lost.

The grave-diggers are the professed clowns of the play. They are so described in the old text. In keeping with the sombre spirit of the play, they jest about graves and corpses, bones and skulls. They talk with the learning of a Mrs Malaprop about suicides and jury's verdicts. They are ready to discuss the definition of a gentleman and poke fun at poor Adam. One of them

bravely and not without some kind of success, enters into a battle of wits with Hamlet himself.

On the whole, however, *Hamlet* is not a play which raises many laughs. We smile occasionally and may chuckle now and then, but for the most part we get only the delight of appreciating wit, sarcasm and dramatic irony. For the comic element is only an undertone in the grave harmony of this tragedy of frustrated genius.

The Supernatural in *Hamlet*.

The supernatural in *Hamlet* is provided by the ghost of the late King Hamlet. It is essential to the machinery of the plot and has an important part to play in the dramatic scheme of things. Shakespeare does not bring the Ghost on to the stage merely to pander to the taste of the groundlings or to indicate to the 'censure of the wise' that the hero has a lively imagination and is, as Mr. Shaw would put it 'a Galtonic visualiser'. The disembodied spirit of the Royal Dane has to serve a function of no little consequence in the plot. It reveals to us the setting of the story and the full intricacies of the initial dramatic situation. It is solely through the Ghost that an unsuspected murder is brought to light, and the whole subsequent course of action owes its motive-power to the foul fratricide thus revealed. So Mr. Verity points out: "Without the Ghost's initial revelation of truth to Hamlet, there would be no occasion for revenge: in other words, no tragedy of *Hamlet*."

The Ghost's subsequent appearance in the bed-room scene, turns the spotlight on Hamlet's fatal weakness and gives an interesting clue for measuring the extent of Gertrude's fall from grace. And the whole atmosphere of mystery and awe, which envelopes *Hamlet* and sets

the meditative musings of its hero in bold relief against a melodramatic background, owes not a little to the introduction of a visitor from beyond the grave.

In spite of all this, however, the true nature of the Ghost, like most other things in *Hamlet*, has been the subject of acute controversy. Is it a hallucination conjured up by the fevered fancy of Hamlet, or does it possess a valid existence independent of any one's fancies? The question has long been debated, and on our answer thereto depends our estimate of Hamlet's character and our view of the development of the action in the play. A study of the text, when supplemented by a knowledge of Elizabethan thinking on ghosts and spirits, sheds sufficient light on the dramatic intentions of Shakespeare, and suggests that most of the puzzles on this question arise on account of the revolutionary changes that have taken place in our intellectual landscape since the spacious days of good Queen Bess.

What picture does the text give of the ghost? We are not told how the spirit of the Royal Dane appeared to Marcellus and Bernardo on the first two occasions of its reported appearance. We can only learn that it was 'a dread sight.' However, as they recognise it fairly easily, when they see it for the third time in the presence of Horatio, we may presume that on those two occasions also, it was clad in armour from head to foot. Be that as it may, the spirit of King Hamlet comes on the stage, a majestic and aweinspiring figure, wearing a coat-of-mail, as if prepared for battle.

The full effect wrought by the introduction of this figure, overwhelming in its realism, on a stage dominated by the conventional semi-comic Senecan spook, can only be understood in the light of

contemporary history. Suffice it here to note that even such an incarnation of commonsense as the redoubtable Dr. Johnson, writing some two hundred years later than Shakespeare, described the apparition in Act I as 'chilling the blood with horror.' Yet another touch of convincing realism is seen in the appearance of the Ghost dressed in his habit as he lived in the bed-room scene—no longer a terrifying phantom, but a forlorn and withal noble spirit, seeking in vain some kind of rapprochement with his frail Gertrude and appalled by the wall of separation that her sensuality has built between them.

Shakespeare has taken every care to frame this arresting picture in an effective setting of Elizabethan ghost-lore. Many details may be gathered from scattered references in the play. The ghost may be solid-seeming, clad in armour or apparelled in dressing-gown. But it is incorporeal, "invulnerable as the air." Weapons cannot cleave it, men are powerless to bar its progress: those who came in its way, it was feared, did so at their peril. Hence the bravado of Horatio's "I will cross it though it blast me." And it could not talk, unless it was addressed first. So Bernardo says: "It would be spoke to" (I.1) Only scholars learned in Latin and armed with formulas of exorcism could safely venture upon so dangerous a business as accosting a spectre. That is why Marcellus and Bernardo requisition the services of Horatio, a Latinist and a student of Wittenburg.

Spirits could stir abroad only during the night. At cock-crow, they have 'to hie to their confines', wherever these might be. Their appearance is an omen of evil significance. Horatio believes that the wanderings of the perturbed spirit of His Late Majesty of Denmark bode 'some strange eruption to the state'.

Hamlet thinks that they presage the revelation of some foul crime. As it happens, both the interpretations of the omen prove true, Hamlet's immediately, and Horatio's a while later. Yet another fear expressed by Horatio that the ghost may make Hamlet mad appears to have been justified in part at least by later events. For it is only after his secret conference with the Ghost that Hamlet puts on the 'antic disposition', which has led to so much questioning of his sanity. The subterranean behaviour of 'the extravagant and erring spirit' in the cellarage scene, strange as it may seem to us, accords well with contemporary popular beliefs.

Is the Ghost Real?

There remains the crucial question of the reality of the Ghost to consider. In connection with this, it has to be noted in the first place that the Ghost is seen more than once in the play and by more than one person. Marcellus and Bernardo report in the first scene that the 'dreaded sight' was 'twice seen of them.' When the Ghost makes its first appearance in the play, they see it for the third time. And next night, when they foregather with Hamlet on the haunted 'platform' before the castle, they see it once again. And Hamlet sees it alone for a while in the bed-room scene. A Ghost seen on such diverse occasions and by so many persons cannot owe its existence to the fevered fancy of a single brain. If the Ghost is illusory it must have succeeded in creating what must be deemed a collective hallucination more than once. And we may be reasonably sure that, if this was his intention, Shakespeare would not have left it so obscure as to be divined some centuries later by a sceptical and free-thinking world.

This is not, however, the whole of the story. What puzzles and irritates the student is that in spite of this

cumulative evidence in favour of the authenticity of the ghost, there are found, scattered throughout the play, numerous suggestions impugning its 'honesty.' The Queen for one thing, cannot see the Ghost at all. Hamlet, for another, describes Death as opening the door to "The undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns" after meeting and talking with his father's wandering spirit. And why, if the Ghost were real, did he find it necessary to test the truth of its story by enacting the *Murder of Gonzago* before Claudius? It is here that we entrench on the field of Sixteenth Century spiritualism, and Prof. Dover Wilson has shown how illuminating a study of *Hamlet* can be, set against the background of the great ghost-controversy of the time.

There were three more or less clearly defined theories about ghosts and spirits in Elizabethan England. The medieval belief was that the ghosts were the spirits of the dead returned from Purgatory for some specific purpose, which it was the duty of the pious to further, if possible, so that the wandering souls might go back to rest. After the Reformation, it was found that this view could not square in with Protestant theology, which had rejected Purgatory; and formally at least it became identified with Catholicism. But as a matter of fact, it survived as a popular superstition in many Protestant communities.

There are one or two cryptic suggestions in the play hinting that the spirit of King Hamlet is from Purgatory. The Ghost speaks of having died 'unaneled', that is, without receiving the extreme unction, a definitely Catholic rite. Hamlet himself swears by St. Patrick immediately after seeing the Ghost, and the patron saint of Ireland is believed to be the Keeper of the Purgatory.

How there could be a Catholic Ghost in Lutheran Denmark is a question which we may consider later.

Let us now proceed to note that against this Catholic theory we have the orthodox Protestant point of view, espoused off and on by Horatio and Hamlet. The theological doctrine was that the souls went to Heaven or to Hell after death, and could not return to earth. What people called ghosts were really angels or devils, assuming familiar human forms for purposes of their own. Hamlet, as a student of Wittenburg, is obsessed by the doubt that the spirit he saw might be some denizen of Hell, 'a goblin damned' bringing with him 'blasts of Hell'. And it is this doubt of Hamlet that puts the Ghost on trial till the play scene and supplies an adequate motive for staging the *Murder of Gonzago*. Here too we must find an explanation for Hamlet's description of the world beyond the grave as "the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns". Hamlet was all the while trying to be a good Protestant, in spite of 'the sensible and true avouch' of his eyes.

Some light can be thrown on the notoriously obscure cellarage scene if we look upon Hamlet there as trying to deceive his companions into thinking that the Ghost they saw was an evil spirit. He adopts towards his father's spirit the attitude of a conjurer towards his familiar. The object is patently to preserve—for the time being at least—the awful secret that had been revealed to him. And the Ghost plays up to his plan, thereby perhaps giving unwittingly some fillip to his Protestant prepossessions. Yet another view, that of the sceptic, is seen in Horatio's first reactions to the report of Marcellus and Bernardo about the haunted terrace. Reginald Scot in his *Discoverie Of Witchcraft* (published in 1584) suggests that there are about two

possible explanations for every alleged manifestation of ghosts or spirits—hallucination or knavery: and this view is mirrored in Horatio's suggestion that the Ghost is but a fantasy. The Queen's inability to see the spirit of her husband is proof only of the grossness of her flesh.

Here are details of the setting in which the portrait of the Ghost is framed. In the very first scene of the play, we have, as Prof. Dover Wilson points out, all the elements of a Shaw discussion drama, with the discussion left out,—Marcellus and Bernardo clinging to popular beliefs, Horatio at first sceptical and then vacillating between the Protestant and Catholic points of view, and the Ghost itself, silent, mysterious, suggestive. Shakespeare makes dramatic capital out of the conflicting trends in popular thought. He makes the various characters react differently towards the Ghost in his play. And out of the very uncertainty about the 'honesty' of the Ghost, he makes his play a study in suspense.

But what ultimate metaphysical significance are we to attach to the Ghost? Which of these conflicting points of view did the poet wish us to adopt? The answers to questions like these are far from clear. It may be (and has been) argued that, since Hamlet is in the end convinced about the 'honesty' of the Ghost and the guilt of Claudius is indisputably proved, there is implicit support to the Catholic doctrine. But Shakespeare might have replied to the argument: "It were to consider too curiously to consider so." Surely we are here going beyond the poet's intentions as revealed in the play. The trial of the Ghost for its 'honesty' equates itself dramatically with trial of Claudius for murder. The charge against Claudius is sustained, and so far as the purposes of the play are concerned, the Ghost is authentic enough.

But is it a Catholic Ghost? If so, how are we to account for a Catholic Ghost in Lutheran Denmark? Shakespeare gives us no help at all here. Obdurate Protestants among his audience might indeed have argued that the Ghost had brought with it 'blasts of hell,' despite the truth of its accusation of Claudius. It unhinges Hamlet's sovereign reason: it is responsible ultimately not merely for the death of Claudius, but also for a regular holocaust involving both houses of Hamlet and Polonius. To make out the place of the Ghost in a metaphysical scheme was outside Shakespeare's purpose. To those who are worried by such unsolved riddles, the dramatist has his answer ready and pat:

"There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,"

and thereby he invests the supernatural element in the play with an authentic atmosphere of reverence and mystery, adding one more touch to the fascination that is *Hamlet*.

Use of Prose and Verse in the Play.

The normal medium of Shakespeare's plays is blank verse. The regular blank verse line is an iambic pentametre. That is to say, it consists of five iambic feet, an iambus being a foot of two syllables, of which the first is unstressed and the second stressed. A succession of lines, strictly according to this pattern, particularly if they are 'end-spot', is certain to tire the ear. So, Shakespeare frequently varies the rhythm. Among the chief devices that he employs to secure this effect may be mentioned the use of weak stresses to break the monotony of the regular pattern, the substitution of a trochee for the iambus here and there, and the occasional insertion of irregular length. Sometimes syllables are slurred over

and sometimes lengthened. Additional unstressed syllables are sometimes used to eke out the deca-syllabic line. Above all, Shakespeare almost always writes run on verse and rarely confines himself to the 'end-stopt' variety.

There are occasional excursions into rhyme. Shakespeare in his own development as a dramatist gradually out-grows the use of rhyme. As critics have pointed out, while there are two rhymed lines to every one of blank verse in *Love Labour's Lost*, there are only two rhymed lines in the whole of *The Tempest*. In a middle period play like the *Hamlet*, rhyme is used mostly for the purpose of denoting the termination of a scene. The primitive conditions of the Elizabethan stage may have rendered this device convenient. Examples of such usage may be found at the conclusion of Act I, Sc. 2 and Act II, Sc. 2. Rhyme also sometimes indicates the climax of a speech or a train of reflections, as at the end of I. v.:

The time is out of joint,— O curs'd spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!

In the play within the play, Shakespeare writes in rhyme, as he deliberately imitates the old rhyme tragedy. The songs of Ophelia and the grave-digger are necessarily in rhyme. Hamlet's essay at poetry in his love letter is also in rhyme.

Nearly a third of *Hamlet* is in prose, giving us ample material to infer the uses to which Shakespeare put it in his plays. Prose is employed by him mainly as the medium of pedestrian conversation, when he finds it desirable to lower the dramatic pitch, as for instance in the conversation with the actors in Act II. ii. Comic characters (like the grave-diggers) and persons in humble position (like the actors in II.ii. and the sailors in IV. vi.)

generally speak in prose. Sometimes in Shakespeare's plays extreme emotion finds expression in prose, as though even blank verse were a medium too artificial for it. Insanity, whether real or feigned, as in the case of Ophelia and Hamlet, also finds expression in prose. Letters (as those of Hamlet to Ophelia, Horatio and Claudius) offer an example of one of the minor uses to which Shakespeare puts prose.

There is, however, one truly wonderful passage of prose in *Hamlet*, (beginning with "this goodly frame" and ending with "the paragon of animals" II. ii. 290—8) which does not come under any of the above categories and to which it is not easy to find a parallel. Speaking of it, Mr Verity points out that in this case "the prose is not specially introduced to express a particular tone of thought or emotion", but that "it merely continues the form of the preceding dialogue for the sake of general harmony of effect but breathes into that form the spirit of the loftiest imaginative ardour"

The variations that Shakespeare plays on the use of blank verse, rhyme and prose are therefore many and complex.

The Gonzago Play.

The 'play within the play' is a well-known technical device employed by dramatists for giving an interesting twist to their plots. Its introduction in the Hamlet-story is probably due to Kyd who shows a partiality for this artifice in the *Spanish Tragedy*. Unfortunately, however, it does not fit in very well with the scheme of *Hamlet* and raises many perplexing questions

Let us consider the context. Hamlet is bidden by his father's spirit to a duty of vengeance against Claudius. Hamlet learns that his father was foully murdered by Claudius. Nevertheless he hesitates and procrastinates, "lapsed in time and passion," until the arrival of the touring players inspires him with a sudden impulse to test the guilt of the King by a play. In the face of the solemn revelation made by the ghost, why should Hamlet still think of putting Claudius on trial? "The play is the thing," he exclaims, "to catch the conscience of the King." He has doubts about the 'honesty' of the ghost, and hence doubts also about his uncle's guilt.

The Gonzago play puts both Claudius and the ghost on trial, the former for fratricide and the latter for its 'honesty'. The basis for these doubts lay, as Prof. Dover Wilson had shown, in theological and metaphysical difficulties about the nature of ghosts. The old Catholic theory was that the ghosts were visitors from Purgatory, whose desires it is our duty to fulfil as far as possible. The Protestants rejected Purgatory and looked on wandering spirits as angels or devils in disguise. Hamlet is obsessed by doubts as to the true nature of the ghost and the truth of its revelation. Is it a visitor from Purgatory or from Hell? Is it a devil in disguise trying to tempt him into crime or is it his father's spirit, calling for revenge? He decides to set these doubts at rest by an elaborate trial of the King, which will at the same time put the genuineness of the ghost to proof*. Here is the motive for the play within the play.

A second difficulty that has to be faced is this. How is it that the repertory of the touring players contains a play whose plot parallels in all its details the crime of

* For a fuller discussion of this subject, vide *Supernatural Element in Hamlet*.

Claudius? So formidable indeed did this difficulty seem to Dr Greg that he has suggested that the ghost is a hallucination and that the crime of Claudius is imagined by Hamlet being only a subconscious reflex of the impressions formed many years ago when seeing this play. Very probably, however, this difficulty is felt only when studying the play in a closet. On the stage, Shakespeare takes care to guard the audience against getting any feeling of improbability. We are told that a scene in the *Murder of Gonzago* comes very near the circumstance of the elder Hamlet's murder. And we are made to understand that Hamlet is going to adapt it, and adapt it to some purpose. And in the excitement of the play scene, we forget, as we are meant to, that the *Murder of Gonzago* is, except in the matter of the relationship of the murderer and his victim, the story of the murder of King Hamlet.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in the working out of the play within the play is the problem raised by the Dumb Show. It summarises the play in pantomime. The murder and the marriage of the widow and the murderer are both clearly shown. Yet Claudius does not flinch. He sits through the play, and it is only when Lucianus the nephew pours poison in the ears of the sleep-Gonzago, that he is stung to the quick and stops the play. If he can sit unmoved through the dumb-show, why should he stop the play in the middle and deliberately betray himself to Hamlet?

There are only two possible answers to the question. Firstly, it may be assumed that Claudius could endure one shock, but not two of the same kind. Prof. Dover Wilson calls this the 'second tooth' theory on the analogy of a patient at the dentist's enduring the agony of having one tooth pulled out, but losing his fortitude when a second is similarly dealt with. Mr. Granville Barker argues for this theory, mainly because he seems to feel

that on any other view, the part assigned to Hamlet in the play scene will be very complicated. But on the face of it, however, it is difficult to conceive how a forewarned Claudius can be so lacking in presence of mind as to betray himself.

The alternative hypothesis gets over this difficulty, but has to face others of its own. Prof. Dover Wilson suggests that the King and the Queen do not see the dumb show. It is a quick action in pantomime and may easily escape the attention of the royal couple. The King after the play is some time in progress, asks Hamlet whether he has heard the 'argument' and whether there is no offence in it, a question which he is not likely to have asked if he had watched the dumb-show. And it is also curious that, in case Hamlet should have seen the dumb-show, Hamlet makes no remarks about his reactions to it. We shall therefore have to assume that the King and the Queen do not see the dumb-show and that the actual play first raises misgivings in them and finally makes Claudius lose all his self-control.

But this hypothesis raises a further question: How does it come to pass that players introduce a dumb-show which all but spoils Hamlet's well-conceived plan? It has been argued by Prof. Dover Wilson that the dumb-show must be regarded as being introduced in the play on the sole responsibility of the actors. Hamlet is anxious from the beginning to see that his mine is suddenly sprung on the King. He instructs the actors to eschew extravagance in gesture and never to overstep the modesty of nature in their actions, so that the King may be lulled into a false sense of security and remain unprepared to face the shock, when the murder scene comes.

It is here, Prof. Dover Wilson urges, that we have to find a dramatic justification for Hamlet's exposition of

the principles of sound acting. Dumb-shows practically are among Hamlet's pet abominations. They are for the vulgar mob. He points out that "the groundlings" are "for the most part capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise." And when the dumb-show appears as a surprise item in the programme, Hamlet is indignant. "Marry," he exclaims, "this is miching mallecho: it means mischief." The '*mischief*' is a reference not to the crime of Claudius, but to the incorrigible perversity of the actors. Hamlet fears that "the players cannot keep counsel, they'll tell all." Fortunately for him the dumb-show escapes the King's observation and the prologue does not explain it.

Such a hypothesis also naturally explains the dramatic purpose of the dumb-show. Shakespeare had before him a fairly difficult problem. The play, in order to catch the conscience of the King, must take him by surprise. And as an overwhelming proof of the guilt of Claudius, it must suffer a rude interruption at the climax. At the same time, the audience must have some idea of the nature of the plot so that they may follow the development of the play with interest and be ready at the right moment to watch the reactions of Claudius.

Put briefly, the play must be so presented that while the audience knows the trend of the plot, Claudius has to be kept in ignorance till the last moment. One plausible solution would be to introduce a scene where the play is being rehearsed. But this will mean more or less a duplication of the play-scene. The device actually employed by Shakespeare of a summary in pantomime, which escapes the King's observation, ensures the same end with greater economy of means. It may be noted in passing that the dumb-show is here put to a somewhat unusual use. Normally on the Elizabethan stage it was employed to foreshadow coming events symbolically or to bridge gaps

in action. It fulfils neither of these functions here, and can be said to have dramatic significance only as it is understood as the poet's expedient for making the play-scene full of deadly irony for Claudius.

One more question of some interest still remains. How is it that while the King's abrupt departure proves conclusively his guilt for Hamlet and for the audience, it bears a different significance for the court? The courtiers appear to have felt that the play was one of Hamlet's mad pranks, intended to insult and intimidate the King. The long-drawn discussion over the second marriage between the player queen and her husband could not of course miss its mark. But the regicide shown on the stage was for all those who were not in the secret, not the revelation of a crime, but a seditious threat by mad Hamlet. Lucianus was the nephew of Ganzago, as Hamlet of Claudius; and what Lucianus did, the court supposed, Hamlet wanted to do.

The play-scene shows Hamlet at his best. He is playing the part of Deputy Providence, plotting, arranging, baiting a trap. The plan is almost upset by the foolishness of the actors, but by a strange turn of luck, the King misses the dumb-show. Now making fun of Ophelia, now darting sarcasms at his mother, now playing Chorus to his little show and now mocking the King, Hamlet shows his versatile genius and admirable presence of mind throughout the scene.

Local Colour in *Hamlet*.

The Elizabethan stage had none of the elaborate properties of the modern stage. It left much to the imagination, and the dramatist had to use descriptions and allusions to give each scene its local habitation and name. It is true of course that the Elizabethan

audience did not care much for history or geography and generally loved to see the typical English folk of the time mirrored in characters of all times and countries. Even so, if a poet wrote a play about a particular country, he had to make some attempt to achieve verisimilitude, however unconvincing it may seem to twentieth century scholars.

Denmark was, at the time when *Hamlet* was written, a comparatively unknown country to the English. Shakespeare probably got his knowledge of Denmark through three of his fellow-actors in his company, Kemp, Bryan and Pope, who had visited Elsinore in 1585. The names of Bryan and Pope appear in the list of the actors of Shakespeare's plays prefixed to the first Folio. Probably it was this fact which induced him to transfer the scene of the play from Jutland (in Saxo) to Elsinore. There was also, it is interesting to note, a castle near Elsinore in those days.

Shakespeare tries to get his effect mainly by a few allusions to Danish custom, the incorporation of a few Danish names, and the use of a few Danish words. Drunkenness was a vice commonly attributed to the Danes in England and the drinking of healths to the accompaniment of cannonshot was a peculiar national custom, which is described at some length by Master William Segar, "Garter King at Armes" in his diary under date July 14, 1603. Kettledrums are mentioned only in *Hamlet*, among Shakespeare's plays, and it has been suggested that the instrument was specially characteristic of Denmark. Another interesting hypothesis argues that dumb-shows of the kind found in *Hamlet* were common in Danish drama. Wittenburg, again, with its Lutheran associations, adds one more touch to the local colour in the play.

Of the names in the play, Hamlet is of course derived from the Amleth of the old saga*. Fynes Morison, the Elizabethan traveller, refers to a Senator at the the Danish Court of the name of Rosencrantz. Dowden points out "the autograph signatures—dated 1577—of Jorgen Rosencrantz and P. Guildenstern—appear on the same page of an old German album in the Royal Public Library at Stuttgart, the original owners of which had resided for sometime at Copenhagen."

A letter in the *Times Literary Supplement* dated Jan. 28, 1926 refers to 'one Frederick Rosencrantz...a member of the Danish diplomatic mission sent to Queen Bess. In 1593 he had married a Guildenstern and was accompanied to London by his wife's brother, a Guildenstern. These two men were both graduates of Wittenburg University and described as dashing and accomplished men of the world'**. Brandes points out that these names were corrupt forms of the Danish Rosekrans and Gyldenstern. Voltemand (Voltman of the First Quarto) appears to have been derived from Danish Valdemar. Gertrude, a genuine Danish name, is Shakespeare's substitute for the Geruth of the novel. Yorick also is probably to be traced to a Danish source, Rosic, Erick or Jorg. Among the Danish words used in the play 'rouse' may be mentioned. Mr. Verity suggests that *upspring* and *crantz*, though Teutonic rather than Scandinavian, 'lent a foreign tone' and constitute 'effective touches of nothern colouring'.

But these touches are all on the surface. Shakespeare did not make them with absolute seriousness. The discussion about the state of the English theatre which Hamlet has with the players shows how lightly the poet dealt with the history and geography of his plot.

*Vide Essay on the Sources.

**Quoted by Prof. Dover Wilson.

The Political Situation in Denmark

The succession of Claudius to the throne of Denmark is one of the many riddles of the play. In the usual course of things, Hamlet must have succeeded his father. And there are no peculiar circumstances justifying his exclusion. He is not too young to take up the responsibilities of kingship, nor is he unpopular with the people or the court. Yet Claudius quietly ascends the throne after his brother, and there is no murmur of protest against the disinheritation of Hamlet. We have certainly here a curious state of things requiring some explanation. But Shakespeare has not cared to furnish any.

It is generally assumed that the monarchy in Denmark is conceived as elective in the play, and that Claudius became King by a free vote of the nobles. This hypothesis has the weight of Blackstone's authority behind it, and it is generally supported by one or two references in the play to 'election'. Hamlet says in V. ii. that Claudius "popp'd in between the election and his hopes"; and later, just before his death he declares:

" But I do prophesy the election lights
On Fortinbras, he has my dying voice".

Now what exactly does this 'election' mean? Who is the electorate and from whom are they to exercise their choice? To answer to questions like these, we have in the first place to decide whether Shakespeare understood the full constitutional implications of an 'elective' monarchy. We cannot be sure whether or not he knew of the Danish practice in the matter of succession to the throne, but this much is certain that Shakespeare always represents England

and English life wherever he may lay the scene of his plays, be it Arcadia or Bohemia, Venice or Vienna, Rome or Elsinore. In spite of all the care that references to Danish drunkenness and the custom 'more honoured in the breach than in the observance' and the use of Danish names, *Hamlet* is no more a Danish play than *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is Greek. Hamlet himself quite openly refers to the contemporary English stage, however shocking it may seem to purists. It is more than doubtful therefore the Shakespeare conceived of succession to the throne in Denmark being dependent on a free election.

The one thing that we definitely know about the election' suggests that English rather than Danish practice is alluded to by Shakespeare. Hamlet, when about to die, nominates Fortinbras to succeed him. The 'dying voice' of the preceding monarch is an important factor in the election and here is a distinct reference to English custom. Very probably, therefore, by the term 'election', Shakespeare meant no more than the proclamation of a new sovereign by the Privy Council. And the second scene of the first Act where Claudius announces his marriage with Gertrude looks very much like the representation of a session of the English Privy Council.

If that is the case, we have next to find out how Claudius managed to set aside the rights of Hamlet, who is the legitimate heir to the kingdom. Shakespeare never tries to explain this, and we can only guess at what was in his mind. Prof. Dover Wilson suggests that the description of the Queen by Claudius as "imperial Jointress" gives us a possible clue to the legal quibble by which he may have ascended the throne. A jointress' is a widow who retains life-interest in the

estate of her deceased husband Queen Gertrude, as widow of the elder Hamlet, may be regarded as having a life interest in the crown, and Claudius may claim the throne as her husband.

Be this as it may, there is some evidence to think that Hamlet regards his uncle as an usurper. In the bed-chamber scene, he stigmatises Claudius as

"A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket "

And in most of his mad talk with the King, Hamlet deliberately introduces a note of resentment, as of a dispossessed heir against an illegal trespasser. This is the primary cause for the King's growing uneasiness at Hamlet's attitude. He tries at first, to soothe and conciliate Hamlet—witness the announcement of Hamlet as the heir-apparent. The importance attached by the King and the constitutional pandits of the time to this declaration may be estimated by the surprise expressed by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, that Hamlet should feel ambitious and dissatisfied after securing 'the voice of the King himself' for his succession to the throne. But conciliation fails and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must have reported to the King that Hamlet was suffering from suppressed ambition. The English cruise perhaps first occurs to the King as the means for effecting a cure of the 'melancholy' resulting from thwarted ambition. And the opinion of the court on the *Murder of Gonzago* appears to be that Hamlet was indulging in a culmsy threat of regicide.

If this aspect of the relationship between Hamlet and his uncle is forgotten, half his talk with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern loses its point, and the attitude of the court over the sudden stoppage of the play

by the King becomes inexplicable. There is every reason to believe that the Elizabethan audience looked on Claudius as an usurper. Dr. Johnson never calls him by any other name. At the worst, even the elective monarchy of Denmark confined the choice to members of the royal house. And Hamlet has as good claims as Claudius, and has every reason to nurse a grievance against his uncle.

That Shakespeare does not bring out very prominently this feeling of Hamlet is due to the fact that the Prince's attention is occupied from the beginning, by a far greater wrong. Smooth-tongued, oleaginous Claudius has never been Hamlet's favourite: but his incestuous alliance with Gertrude, so soon after the death of the elder Hamlet, shocks the Prince to the depths of his being. But at first the resentment is less against his uncle than against his mother. And the ghost's revelation takes him by surprise. And his obsession with his mother's crime and the duty of vengeance laid on him throws his thwarted rights into the background. He plays with them when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to 'sound his stops'. He conveys a threat of imminent assassination by making the murderer in the 'Murder of Gonzago' nephew to the King. But here is surely a political as well as a moral grievance against Claudius. "However it be looked at", writes Prof. Dover Wilson, "an elective throne in Shakespeare's Denmark is a critical mare's nest".

A Survey of Criticism

Few works in literature have provoked as much commentary, good, bad and indifferent, as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the seventies of the last century when Furness published his *Variorum* edition of *Hamlet*, he had to devote two volumes to it, a distinction (as has been pointed out) reserved for no other play. Since then considerable additions have been made to the

subject: and in publishing the Cambridge Edition of the play, Prof. Dover Wilson has found it necessary to devote three volumes to *Hamlet*—one for the manuscripts, another for text and commentary, and a third for the dramatic and artistic issues raised by the play. It is impossible in a brief essay even to take a bird's-eye view of the entire field. All that can be done is to draw attention to some prominent landmarks and give some indication of the variety of opinion that exists on the subject.

There is some evidence to suppose that even before Shakespeare set his hands to the play, it had attained notoriety on the Elizabethan stage. The cry of "Hamlet, revenge" attributed to the ghost of the old play became a by-word among the gallants and *litterateurs* of the day. But the first criticism of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, now available on record, is found in Gabriel Harvey's *Marginalia* in a copy of Speight's *Chaucer*. The poet's *Lucrece* and *Hamlet*, he declares, "have it in them to please the wiser sort". It is curious to find the luscious youthful *Lucrece* bracketed with the mature and thoughtful *Hamlet*, and it is unfortunate that Harvey does not mention the points of interest or sources of pleasure in *Hamlet*.

And right through the seventeenth century there is no record of any intelligent interest in or critical questioning of the play. Hanmer in 1736 invokes for the first time the question mark, all too familiar to modern students of *Hamlet*: "There appears no reason at all", he writes, "why this young Prince did not put the usurper to death as soon as possible". He is constrained to conclude that "had Hamlet gone naturally to work there would have been an end of the play". And so the poet was 'obliged to delay his hero's revenge but then he should have

contrived some good reason for it'. He also passes a stricture on the 'antic disposition' declaring that Hamlet's assumption of madness was due to 'an injudicious conforming to the groundwork of the plot.' The sturdy commonsense of Dr. Johnson echoes this sentiment. "Of the feigned madness of Hamlet, there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not have done with a reputation for sanity."

Mackenzie and Richardson, though contemporaries of Johnson, were steeped in sentiment and looked at the problem through rose-tinted glasses. And one of them gives the answer to the doubts of Hanmer and Johnson. "The impropriety of Gertrude's behaviour," writes Richardson, "her ingratitude to the memory of her former husband and the depravity she discovers in the choice of a successor afflict his (Hamlet's) soul and cast him into utter agony.—Knowing that he must appear incoherent and inconsistent, he is not unwilling to have it believed that his reason is somewhat deranged and that the strangeness of his conduct admits of no other explanation." It may also be noted in passing that Johnson and Richardson take widely differing views about Hamlet's reluctance to slay Claudius in the so-called prayer-scene. According to Richardson, Hamlet is withheld "by the ascendent of a gentle disposition, by the scruples and perhaps weakness of extreme sensibility." The redoubtable Doctor, however, is shocked beyond measure at the concern that Hamlet exhibits about the post-mortem state of his uncle's soul. "This speech," he writes, in which Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would punish, is too horrible to be read or uttered."

This is, however, merely a side-issue. On the main question of the hero's character, Richardson reaches the conclusion now familiar to all students of the play that 'Hamlet's original constitution renders him unequal to the contest,' and that in the reasons he adduces for delay, "he exhibits a most exquisite picture of self-deceit." Goethe expresses a not dissimilar view. He thinks that in the play "Shakespeare sought to depict a great deed laid upon a soul unequal to the performance of it." He continues: "Here is an oak tree planted in a costly vase, which should have received into its bosom only lovely flowers: the roots spread out; the vase is shivered to pieces. A beautiful, pure and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off: every duty is holy to him—this too hard, The impossible is required of him—not the impossible in itself, but the impossible to him."

Coleridge takes a somewhat different view. According to him, Shakespeare seems to have wished in *Hamlet* "to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses and our meditation on the workings of our minds—an equilibrium between the real and imaginary worlds", "In *Hamlet*", Coleridge continues, "this balance is disturbed...We see a great, an almost enormous intellectual activity and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent on it, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities. This character Shakespeare places in circumstances under which it is obliged to act on the spur of a moment. Hamlet is brave and careless of death, but he vacillates from sensibility and procrastinates from thought and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve." The aptest comment made

on these remarks is that Coleridge held the mirror up to Hamlet and saw his own face in it. He mistakes, as Bradley has convincingly shown, the effect for the cause. Hamlet's general addiction to thought and occasional aversion from it are the effects and not causes of his malady.

To the same school of thought, more or less, belongs Schlegel. "The whole," he writes, "is intended to show how a calculating consideration, which aims at exhausting, so far as human foresight can, all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, cripples the power of acting". "Hamlet", he continues, "is a hypocrite towards himself: his far-fetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his want of determination... He has no firm belief in himself or anything else... He loses himself in labyrinths of thought".

Prof. Dowden adopts this view, but with a significant modification, points out that Coleridge's picture of Hamlet tends 'to mislead criticism by attaching an exaggerated importance to some element of Hamlet's character'. "The Prince" he explains, "is not merely or chiefly intellectual; the emotional side of his character is quite as important as the intellectual; his malady is deep-seated in his sensibilities and in his heart as in his brain". His description of Hamlet's malady follows more or less the lines of Coleridge's. Hamlet, he observes, "loses a sense of fact because with him each object and event transforms and expands itself into an idea.. He cannot steadily keep alive within himself a sense of the importance of any positive, limited thing or deed, for example."

And the cause for this Dowden finds in the kind of life that Hamlet has led in the past. "When the play opens," he writes, "he has reached the age of thirty

years, and he has received culture of every kind but the culture of active life. During the reign of the strong-willed elder Hamlet there was no call to action for his meditative son. He has slipped on into years of full manhood, still a haunter of the University, a student of philosophies, an amateur in art, a ponderer on the things of life and death, who has never formed a resolution or executed a deed."

We may now pass on to Bradley, the greatest name undoubtedly in the criticism of Shakespearean Tragedy. Bradley's main thesis is to show how under a specific shock Hamlet's mental and moral strength sustains such damage as makes the duty of vengeance impossible. Critics like Cluttonbrock had drawn attention to this aspect of the question before, but it was left to Bradley to work out the thesis with logical consistency and marshal in its support irrefutable evidence from the play. No one after Bradley can ignore his view. Even if there should be criticism, Bradley's contribution to the solution of the mystery of Hamlet's character will always obtain recognition.*

Towards the last century arose a school of critics generally described as historical, and it is now necessary to refer to their view. They try to discover the history behind the creation of *Hamlet*. They point out that Shakespeare's play is almost certainly based on a crude melodrama by an inferior artist, and they try to account for the puzzles and conundrums of Hamlet by the intractable nature of the material on which Shakespeare had to work.

"Even Shakespeare," says J. M. Robertson, "could not make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." Professor

*A fuller account of Bradley's criticism of Hamlet is given in a separate essay.

Stoll suggests that *Hamlet* is a revenge play like the *Spanish Tragedy* and that the hero's delay is intended to 'save the story.' Schucking stresses the fact that *Hamlet* is a study in melancholy. Mr. T. S. Eliot takes a slightly different view and urges that Shakespeare tried in *Hamlet* to depict the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, but failed to impose this pattern successfully on the intractable material of the old play which he had to refashion. Psychoanalysts have not lost sight of the possibilities opened by the poisoned relation between mother and son in the play and Dr. Ernest Jones has elaborately argued that *Hamlet* suffers from the Oedipus complex.

The last word has surely not yet been said on *Hamlet*. As Professor Bradley points out: "Wherever we are forced to feel the wonder and awe of man's god-like 'apprehension' and his 'thoughts that wander through eternity' and at the same time are forced to see him powerless in his petty sphere of action and powerless (it would appear) from the very divinity of his thought, we remember *Hamlet*."

Among the latest attempts to probe the mystery of *Hamlet* is Prof. Dover Wilson's. He gives an inspired reconstruction of the play, suggesting many a revolutionary change in the popular view of 'what happens in *Hamlet*,' but on the eternal riddle of the motive for *Hamlet*'s delay, he almost begs the question and suggests that the procrastinating hero is the result of a dramatic artifice which combines psychological contradiction with suggestions of overwhelming infinity—a warning perhaps, that as Mr. Walden says in digging for motives we have now reached when 'the spade goes through the drama.'

Bradley on Hamlet

Prof. Bradley's Lectures on *Hamlet* are characterised by analytical insight and synthetic vision. Critics before him had noticed stray facets of Hamlet's character and mistaken the parts for the whole. For the first time in the history of criticism on *Hamlet*, Prof. Bradley endeavoured to look at the elusive Prince from all the possible points of observation provided by the text. He had before him all the vast mass of literature on the play and he has dealt with many of the typical hypotheses suggested therein. After noting all their merits and defects, he has constructed for us a new picture of Hamlet which does not contradict the text of the play and which agrees with our imaginative impressions of the hero.

Let us now glance briefly at Bradley's Lectures on *Hamlet*. He begins by taking note of the eighteenth century critics to whom *Hamlet* offered no problem or puzzle. He then dismisses as beneath consideration the 'lunatic views' on the play and proceeds to take up a few typical pictures of Hamlet's character one by one. The theory that Hamlet's delay was due merely to external difficulties, he considers unsatisfactory, because Hamlet never alludes to such difficulties and always assumes that if he has the will he can accomplish the deed. Moreover, Shakespeare shows in the play Lærtès raising a mob against the King quite easily. Could not Hamlet, the darling of the people, have done it much more easily?

Bradley therefore assumes Hamlet's difficulty to be internal. It is not any conscientious and moral scruple

The main features of Prof. Bradley's conception of Shakespearian Tragedy will be found in the essay on the Subject.

against revenge as such, explicit or disguised, which restrains him. Hardly ever, except perhaps for a solitary passage in V. ii, does he mention such a scruple. All along we are given the impression that the Ghost laid on the Prince a legitimate duty and that Hamlet was guilty of dereliction of duty in not obeying its behests. And when he spares the King in the prayer-scene, he explains his action as due to a desire to see that Claudius gets his deserts in the hereafter. But it is true enough that Hamlet was possessed of extreme moral sensibility and it is possible that conscientious scruples against a bloody revenge might have been one of the pretexts for inaction woven by his fertile brain. Again, the only method of disposing of Claudius that Hamlet appears to have contemplated is stabbing, and he may have felt a moral repugnance to fall down suddenly on a defenceless man, however deserving of death.

Bradley then passes on to ridicule the sentimental views of Hamlet as a kind of *Werther* with a face like Shelley's and a voice like Mr. Tree's. Hamlet does far too many things in the play to merit this description—the killing of Polonius, sending his school fellows to death, boarding the pirate, stabbing the King and pouring poison down his throat and so forth. Says Prof. Bradeley: "This man, the Hamlet of the play, is a heroic, terrible figure...If the sentimental Hamlet had crossed him, he would have hurled him from his path with one sweep of his arm."

The theory advanced by Coleridge and Schelegel is next taken up. According to this view, the cause of the hero's delay is irresolution, brought about by an undue preponderance of the reflective habit of mind. Prof. Bradley agrees that we have here a true description of Hamlet's state of mind, and that colour is lent to this

hypothesis by the false excuses that Hamlet invents to justify his procrastination to himself. But he rejects it on the ground that it mistakes the symptom for the cause and proceeds to formulate his own view of the character of Hamlet.

First, Prof. Bradley gives us a picture of Hamlet as he must have been immediately before his father's death. No one knowing him accuses him in the play of being over-reflective. He evokes respect from the courtiers, though a disappointed heir, and is the darling of the people, who do not worship philosophers. Fortinbras believes that Hamlet would have proved most royal if he had been given the chance. Ophelia says that Hamlet was a soldier. And then look at the decisive things that Hamlet actually does in the play.

The Hamlet of a happier past then must be deemed to have been imperious and impetuous, though masked by a charming courtesy. He must also have possessed an exquisite moral sensibility, "an unbounded delight and faith in everything good and beautiful." His adoration of his father and his admiration for Lærtes ('a very noble youth') and his thrilling paeon in praise of human possibilities prove this. And he never, even in his worst days, fails to make the moral distinction between good and evil and to make the right response thereto. His loathing of his uncle is due to his hatred of evil, of leachery, hypocrisy and drunkenness. Then Hamlet has intellectual genius. And Hamlet's temperament might be called melancholic, inclined to nervous instability, to rapid and perhaps extreme changes of feeling and mood.

Now Hamlet's very first soliloquy shows him to have suffered a rude moral shock by the discovery of his mother's moral depravity. "It brings bewildered horror, then loathing, then despair of human nature. His whole

mind is poisoned". His highest endowments, his moral sensibility and his genius now become his enemies. "A nature morally blunter would have felt even so dreadful a revelation less keenly. A slower and more limited and positive mind might not have extended so widely through its world the disgust and disbelief that have entered it. But Hamlet has the imagination which for evil as well as good, feels and sees all things in one. Thought is the element of his life and his thought is infected. He cannot prevent himself from probing and lacerating the wound in his soul." Try as he may, he cannot free himself from the memory and influence of that terrible shock, and when the vividness of his passion fades away, "it does so only to leave behind a boundless weariness and a sick longing for death."

Prof. Bradley continues in memorable words: "And this is the time which his fate chooses. In this hour of uttermost weakness, this sinking of his whole being towards annihilation, there comes on him, bursting the bounds of the natural world with a shock of astonishment and terror, the revelation of his mother's adultery and his father's murder, and with this, the demand on him, in the name of everything dearest and most sacred, to arise and act. And for a moment, though his brain reels and totters, his soul leaps up in passion to answer this demand. But it comes too late. It does but strike home the last rivet in the melancholy which holds him bound.

The time is out of joint ! O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right——

So he mutters within an hour of the moment, when he vowed to give his life to the duty of revenge: and the rest of the story exhibits his vain efforts to fulfil this duty, his unconscious self-excuses and unavailing self-reproaches, and the tragic results of his delay."

Prof. Bradley then proceeds to explain the nature of the melancholy which holds Hamlet in thrall and points out that, while it is not a normal state of mind, it is still some distance removed from insanity. Both Hamlet's inaction and his inability to understand the reasons therefor arise from this melancholy, which is the immediate result of the double shock of his mother's 'o'erhasty marriage' and the ghost's revelation. Then Dr. Bradley follows the course of action in the play rapidly and demonstrates convincingly the truth of his diagnosis.

It is needless to say that Prof. Bradley has built a very strong case in support of his views: and if at any time in future, there should be any final and irrefutably true view about Hamlet, it is certain to be not far removed from Prof. Bradley's. But one or two possible objections can be urged against this almost perfect analysis. And the first of these is indeed that it is too convincing. That is, Prof. Bradley's Hamlet is more consistent and coherent than Shakespeare's. The critic has smoothened the angularities of the poet's work: he has explained away the inconsistencies of the original and bridged gaps here and there with his imagination. Wherever loose ends were left straggling he has brought them together. In other words, Bradley has, if the phrase may be pardoned, improved on Shakespeare.

Bradley's Hamlet is only one of the many possible patterns into which the hero can be gently squeezed in. He assumes, and far too readily, that the play is about Hamlet's irresolution. There is little doubt that the mystery of the delay is one of the central features of the play, but, as Mr. Waldock has pointed out, the grand problem of *Hamlet* is to determine the extent of this delay. Prof. Bradley makes too little allowance

for the possible genuineness of Hamlet's doubt about the 'honesty' of the ghost.

Again it may be urged against Prof. Bradley that he does not make Hamlet's irresolution seem inevitable. In the state of mind in which Hamlet was at the time of meeting the ghost, was procrastination the only possible course? It is perhaps one of the many reasons for the bewitching charm of the play that we are not allowed to know Hamlet's psychology too precisely. In taking the view that Hamlet's delay is a necessary consequence of the effect of a double shock, Bradley has been led on to adopt to some extent a method of literary criticism, dear to literary critics but which is not above reproach. He has tried to build a superstructure on the foundations laid by Shakespeare. He has tried to fill in the details of a somewhat vague and elusive outline left by the poet. But taken all, in all Bradley's reconstruction of *Hamlet* is a masterpiece, which no student of the play can afford to neglect or ignore. New significances have been discovered in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ever since Bradley gave us the benefit of his analytical insight and synthetic vision.

Hamlet's Age.

The age of Hamlet is among the unsolved riddles of the play. As critics have noted, there are two sets of indications, one tending to show him as a youth, not much past twenty, and another pointing to the conclusion that he is some ten years older.

Evidence in favour of a younger Hamlet includes Lærtès' reference to 'a violet in the youth of primy nature' in II iii, one specific description of the Prince as "that he is young" in the same scene by Polonius, two other references to 'young Hamlet' (I. i. 170 and

V. i, 141) and his representation as a school-mate of men like Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who make the impression of youthfulness. Hamlet talks of going back to Wittenberg, of which one possible interpretation is that he had but lately returned home from studies at the University. And it must also be remembered that Hamlet's mother does not seem to be old enough to a son of thirty.

Against this has to be set the weightier and all but conclusive evidence of the grave-diggers' scene, which makes out Hamlet to be definitely thirty. This is supported by the general impression that Hamlet's own speeches make on most readers. Hamlet has more experience and more wisdom than a callow youth of twenty. And as further testimony in favour of this view may be cited the Player-King's reference to thirty years of married life.

Thus it is clear that Shakespeare intended us to think of Hamlet as a 'formed man' of thirty. The allusions in the grave-diggers' scene are too pointed to bear any other interpretation. And much of the difficulty that critics have felt is due to the fact that they treat *Hamlet* as closet-play rather than as a drama intended for the stage. The moment that Burbage entered the stage, as Bradley points out, it would be clear to all whether Hamlet was twenty or thirty. The inconsistency, if any, may be probably due to Shakespeare's own idea of Hamlet undergoing a transformation during the course of his writing the play.

Hamlet as a Tragic Hero

A Shakespearean tragedy, as Prof. Bradley points out, is prominently the story of one or at most of two persons. *Hamlet* is so exclusively concerned with the

hero that the play without the hero has become a banal comparison to anything with its point left out. The hero of the play must be a person in a conspicuous station in life. Hamlet is the son of a King, and, as Prof. Dover Wilson has shown, a dispossessed heir to the throne of Denmark.

Next, the story must be one of suffering and exceptional calamity for the hero, and in the end the destiny of the tragic world must not merely destroy the hero but also leave a vast wreckage in all directions. "Such exceptional suffering and calamity," to quote Prof. Bradley, "...affecting the hero and—we must now add—extending far and wide beyond him, so as to make the whole scene a scene of woe, are an essential ingredient in tragedy, and a chief source of tragic emotions..."

In order that the full tragic effect may be gained, the hero must to some extent be the cause of his own ruin. It is at the same time necessary that his sufferings must to a large extent be unmerited. Shakespeare contrives to solve this problem by giving his tragic hero a marked one-sidedness, which brings on his ruin. The fundamental tragic trait for Shakespeare is a 'fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion or habit of mind.' It is generally a source at the same time of strength and weakness. Prof. Bradley points out: "It is a fatal gift, but it carries with it a touch of greatness: and when there is joined to it nobility of mind or genius or immense force, we realize the full power and reach of the soul, and the conflict in which it engages, acquires that magnitude which stirs not only sympathy and pity, but admiration, terror and awe."

Now the hero with his greatness and his one-sidedness is placed in a situation where he contrives

his own ruin. "In the circumstances where we see the hero placed," writes Prof. Bradley, "his tragic trait which is also his greatness, is fatal to him. To meet these circumstances something is required which a smaller man might have given but which the hero cannot give. He errs by action or omission, and his error joining with other causes brings on him ruin."

How far does Hamlet satisfy this conception of the tragic hero? As has been already pointed out, he dominates the play. He holds a conspicuous station in life by reason of his birth and his endowments, and he involves in his own ruin quite a number of persons besides himself. The end of *Hamlet* gives us the impression of the quiet that succeeds a storm with the whole landscape strewn with the wreckage of a violent cataclysm of nature.

And what is more important, Hamlet's character is truly tragic. He is endowed with intellectual genius of a high order. He has the imagination of a poet and the gift for abstract reasoning and speculation found only in great thinkers. And he is characterised by extreme moral sensibility. He is generous and idealistic to a fault and tends to look on others as like unto himself. The re-marriage of his mother within a month of the death of his father brings on him cruel disillusionment. Hamlet adored his father, and must have held his mother in high regard. Now he finds her hastily tying herself up in an incestuous wedlock with his uncle, a man whom he despised for his utter contrast with his elder brother. In the sudden shock of learning the truth about his mother, Hamlet begins to look upon the world with disgust. Being flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone, he feels himself rotten to the core.

And while yet the influence of this shock remains, he is confronted with the revelation of the ghost.

Hamlet thus faces a situation when his highest endowments become his enemies. His moral sensibility adds to the poignancy of his sorrow and his intellectual genius makes him brood on his mother's sin, uncle's crime, and the baseness of human nature. His once glowing faith in man becomes the furious cynicism of a disappointed idealist. The double shock that Hamlet sustains is the most reasonable cause of the paralysis that overtakes his will. The duty laid on his shoulders, he feels too weak to discharge. He becomes the symbol of humanity struggling under burdens too hard to bear. It is thus that Hamlet becomes irresolute, and he perishes for his delay in avenging his father. Yet, compared to his virtues, his intellectual genius, his poetic imagination and his nobleness of soul, how insignificant a thing is this weakness of his! His suffering remains uncompensated to the end, so much so that Horatio has to invoke a flight of angels to sing him to his rest after his death.

Hamlet is, in one sense, the architect of his own ruin, but under a Fate less inclined to delight in making him face just the one situation which he cannot cope with and which makes his highest qualities turn his enemies, he need not have suffered. The play is a tragedy because such a hero as Hamlet is made to face the one set of circumstances which inevitably leads to his undoing.

Hamlet's Love Story

"To the celestial and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia, in her excellent white bosom, these :

Doubt thou the stars are fire ;
Doubt that the sun doth move ;
Doubt truth to be a liar ;
But never doubt I love,

O, dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers ; I have not art to recon my groans : but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu.

Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him, Hamlet ”.

Here is the only love-letter of Hamlet to Ophelia that Shakespeare has given us. Contrast its sentiments with those expressed by Hamlet in the nunnery scene. “ I lov'd you not”, he tells Ophelia. “ Get thee to a nunnery,” he says. “ Why marry,” he observes further on, ‘ I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry : be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny ’”. Here are the extreme points of this love story. And its course, in between them can be understood only in the light of the judgement we arrive at on the character of Hamlet.

Let us now try to follow the story of this pair of starcrossed lovers from its beginning. We first hear of Hamlet's addresses to Ophelia only in the parting advice of Lærtes to his sister. (It is significant, as we shall presently see, that Hamlet in his famous soliloquy in I ii makes no mention whatever of Ophelia.) And after the departure of Lærtes, Polonius extracts the whole story from his daughter. Hamlet has ‘ of late’, she admits ‘ made many tenders of his affection’ to her. He has “ importuned her with love in honourable fashion ” and “ given countenance to his speech with almost all the vows of heaven”. Having received these ‘ tenders’, listened to his passionate vows and read his warm love letters, she is yet so docile as to say to her father that she does not know whether or not to believe in Hamlet's profession of love. And when Polonius charges her “ not to give words or talk with Lord Hamlet,” her

only answer is: "I shall obey, my lord." Here is the first stage of the love-story.

Hamlet falls in love with Ophelia and in the first flush of his enthusiasm, he is guilty of those very exaggerations which he later finds offensive in Læertes. It is obviously in this stage of his life, when he has no cares save those of study, that he pens that extravagant love-letter. It is clear that Ophelia on her part responds to his love.

Into this play-world of Hamlet, with love and study as its chief interests, there bursts, with sudden shock, death and crime. Hamlet's father suddenly dies, and while grief at his death is still fresh, Hamlet sees his mother marrying his uncle. At once Hamlet finds the bases of his universe in ruins. The world seems to him

"an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely".

This depression and world-weariness are caused and dominated by a sense of disgust with woman. Whether or not Hamlet was suffering from an Oedipus complex as certain psycho-analysts have suggested, there is little doubt that there was a sexual element in malady. "Frailty, thy name is woman"—so Hamlet sums up his new-found knowledge. And being the son of his mother, he feels her corruption in his very flesh. Love at this time must have lost all its roseate hues for Hamlet. And the shock of the ghost's revelations only deepens his disgust with life in general and woman in particular.

And yet perhaps there was just a chance that experience of a true and loyal love might have saved him from the sore distractions from which he had to suffer. Ophelia

describes to her father a strange and somewhat fearsome visit that Hamlet paid to her :

“ My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
Lord Hamlet—with his doublet all unbrace,
No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,
Ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ancle ;
Pale as his shirt ; his knees knocking each other ;
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors—he comes before me ”.

And she goes on to describe how he took her by the wrist and held her at arm's length, looking as if he would devour her face : and how after a time he left her with a sigh and went away, bending the light of his eyes to the last on her.

Did he come to her in his sore need for some little solace and comfort, notwithstanding the coldness with which his suit had been received of late ? How must Ophelia's dutiful obedience to her father's advice have struck him ? Would not her jilting appear to him a further confirmation of the untrustworthiness of women ? The ghost's revelation opens to him an abyss of horror : and close upon it comes Ophelia's rejection of his suit at a time when he feels love itself foul and loathsome. And yet perhaps there may have been moments when he may have felt the need of a pure and comforting love. And all that he finds, when he seeks for it, is a decisive rejection of his addressess by Ophelia.

And as if to confirm him in his worst suspicions about women, she docilely consents to play the part of a decoyduck in the plot evolved by the scheming brain of Polonius. It is a moot point whether Hamlet knew the plot : but it is clear that he treats her more or less as a prostitute, in the nunnery scene. More than once

he suggests to Polonius that he is a pimp and a pander. It is also evident that Hamlet talks more or less at the King in the scene, very possibly suspecting his presence as an eavesdropper. The suggestion made by Prof. Dover Wilson, that Hamlet overhears the plot of Polonius to spy on an arranged interview between him and Ophelia gives the only possible justification for Hamlet's outrageous behaviour in the scene. No amount of 'sore distraction' or hatred of womankind by itself appears as a sufficient excuse. And it is difficult to reconcile this attitude of Hamlet either with the sentiments of his love letter or with his challenge to Læertes at the grave of Ophelia, to prove his greater love.

Soon after the play-scene, he treats her with a gross familiarity which must have caused her acute embarrassment and provoked unseemly titters among the courtiers. While this phase of Hamlet's cynicism persists, Ophelia behaves towards him with gentleness and consideration. He still remains the lover of her heart. His sovereign reason has been unhinged, and he has to be treated with kindness and sympathy.

Ophelia sees Hamlet for the last time in the play-scene. That night Hamlet kills Polonius through a tragic misapprehension; he is in consequence sent out of Denmark. Ophelia suddenly finds herself struck down by the arrows of a pitiless destiny. In one night her world is over-thrown. Her father dies under mysterious circumstances and her lover is exiled. Her brother, the only person to whom she could have turned for consolation, is in distant Paris. And so she loses her reason. Perhaps in the circumstances, this is the kindest thing that could have happened to her. For she is spared knowledge of the dreadful fact that her father was killed by her lover. And she passes on, pathetic and prattling, to her watery grave.

The love-story, however, does not end here. As Ophelia is being buried, Hamlet returns to Elsinore and watches for some time the funeral proceedings. At first he does not realise whose funeral it is. And when the knowledge comes, it must have given him a shock. Soon after he sees Lærtès jump into the grave beside his sister's coffin and call upon all and sundry to pile the earth over both "the quick and the dead". The unseemly exhibitionism of this grief provokes Hamlet and leads him to a scuffle with Lærtès. The incident is revealing in that it shows that Hamlet sincerely believed himself to have been in love with Ophelia, inspite of the nunnery scene.

There were elements that precluded from the beginning the proposed union in wedlock of Hamlet and Ophelia from being ideal. Hamlet was a man of wide and varied interests, sensitive, artistic and poetical. Uundr a kinder destiny, he might have held a court, spreading out sweetness and light. Ophelia was fair and sweet, but far too docile. She was a dutiful daughter: she might have made a faithful but colourless wife. Hamlet could not have received help from her in any serious crisis. Their marriage would have been happy enough under ordinary circumstances. But in the tragic world of the play, her very gentleness put up a barrier between her and Hamlet and indirectly proves her undoing. It is part of the law of the tragic world that suffering shall be disproportionate to the offence, and the star-crossed love of Ophelia and Hamlet only underlines once again the old, old question, "Why is there pain and suffering in the universe?"

Hamlet's Madness

Whether and to what extent Hamlet was really mad is one of the outstanding puzzles of the play.

Opinions, as may be expected, have varied considerably. Some doctors have for technical reasons certified the Prince as mad at one stage or other of the play, while literary critics have generally taken the view that Hamlet only feigns madness. Dr. Ernest Jones, studying Hamlet as a case for psycho-analysis, has diagnosed complications arising out of an Oedipus complex. According to Furness, Hamlet was free from insanity, both real and feigned. The best way of forming a conclusion on the subject giving rise to such divergent opinions, is to pursue the course of Hamlet's madness in detail and study all the situations in which it manifests itself.

Let us note at the outset that the madness of Hamlet is part of original legend, and part also probably of the old play on which Shakespeare based his own. Indeed it has been suggested that the assumption of an 'antic disposition' by Hamlet is among the unassimilated survivals from the source-play. This traditional association of a mad Hamlet with the story is a strong argument against the theories which try to make out that Hamlet not merely preserved his sanity throughout but also never feigned insanity. There is one plausible objection against the hypothesis of feigned madness urged by Furness, but this may be dealt with more conveniently when reviewing the course of Hamlet's malady.

Hamlet states for the first time that he may assume an 'antic disposition' in the future in I. v. The third oath that he proposes to Marcellus and Bernardo and which is sworn by them after subterranean persuasion from the ghost relates to this subject. Both Horatio and Marcellus, however, had already a taste of this antic disposition a few minutes earlier. The ghost's revelation shakes Hamlet to the foundations of his being. When Hamlet met the ghost, he was already in a

depressed and morbid state of mind, shocked by his mother's hasty and incestuous marriage with his uncle. And then to learn that his mother had been unfaithful to her marriage vow and that his father had been treacherously poisoned by her paramour only seemed to drive the last nails in the coffin of his sanity. In the famous "tables" speech, Hamlet shows clearly the unbearable strain under which he is labouring. He asks his heart to hold together and his sinews to bear him stiffly up. His very brain seems to be on the point of dissolving.

But he gains after an effort some sort of control over himself. Naturally, however, he feels it difficult to behave as though nothing important took place between himself and the ghost. A forced exuberance of spirits helps him stave off immediate enquiries and give vent at the same time to his pent-up feelings. The success with which this hysterical behaviour, partly real and partly assumed, confounds Horatio and Marcellus, suggests to Hamlet the desirability of its assumption in the future. Here, as elsewhere, Hamlet acts on an impulse. There is no necessity to assume that Hamlet foresaw all the ramifications of the antic disposition and thought out on the spur of the moment a deep-laid scheme of dissimulation to trap the king. The question raised by Furness as to how 'the advocates of the theory of feigned insanity' propose 'to account for Hamlet's being able in the flash of time between the vanishing of the ghost and the coming of Horatio and Marcellus to form, horror-struck as he was, a plan for the whole conduct of his future life', rests on false premises.

The next glimpse that we get of Hamlet is some two months later. Ophelia's description of the Hamlet who met her in her closet shows the extent of the change in him. She sees him

“ With his doublet all unbraced ;
 No hat upon his head : his stockings foul'd,
 Ungarter'd and down-gyv'd to his ancles ;
 Pale as his shirt : his knees knocking each other ;
 And with a look so piteous in purport
 As if he had been loosed out of hell
 To speak of horrors. ”

Here we see how it is that neither 'the exterior nor the inward man' resembles 'that it was.' The disordered dress worn by Hamlet has often been considered to be characteristic of a lover, but the following quotation cited by J. Q. Adams from *Dacphantur* (1604) proves almost conclusively that it is indicative only of Hamlet's madness:

Puts off his clothes, his shirt he only wears
 Much like mad Hamlet.

The paleness of his face and his horror-stuck expression suggest that Hamlet is just recovering from one of those hysterical spasms like the one he suffered from immediate reaction to the message of the ghost. That Hamlet's dress as well as demeanour has changed is confirmed by the King's statement to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

“ Something you have heard
 Of Hamlet's transformation—so call it
 Sith nor th'exterior nor the inward man
 Resembles that it was

It is not among the least difficult problems of the play to decide how far it is real and how far assumed.

We may note first the evidence in favour of the inference that there is something really seriously wrong with the mental life of Hamlet. Right through there is of course his inability to carry out the behests of the

ghost, a sort of paralysis of the will. Quite apart from this deep seated malady and as symptoms of its manifestation, we may take account of the exhibitions of extreme and ungovernable agitation, which lead one seriously to suspect Hamlet's sanity.

Prof. Dover Wilson notes that there are at least seven such instances recorded in the play—the cellarage scene, Ophelia's description of Hamlet when he called upon her in her closet, the 'Hecuba' soliloquy, the nunnery scene, the end of the play scene, the bedroom scene and the fight in the grave. Alternating with these moments of ebullient excitement, we have periods of utmost dejection and despair, when suicide assumes a roseate hue. A foretaste of this mood is given by Hamlet's first soliloquy, where he expresses his disgust at his mother's incest. And a more or less adequate expression of the desire for self-destruction is found in the famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy. Other instances of this morbid longing for death may be easily cited. When Polonius asks Hamlet in II. ii "Will you walk out of the air, my lord?", Hamlet answers, "Into my grave" (204-305). And when in the same scene bidding farewell, he tells the Prince, "My honourable lord, I most humbly take my leave of you," Hamlet answers: "You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal: except my life, except my life, except my life."

Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he suffers from bad dreams and the whole world seems to him a pestilential congregation of vapours. Here is something more than mere eccentricity of demeanour, an antic disposition put on or off at will. As if to confirm such a view the King refers to Hamlet's turbulent and dangerous lunacy at the beginning of Act III. The

loving observation of the Queen has caught some of the salient features of the 'sore distraction':

And thus a while the fit will work on him
Anon as patient as a female dove
His seilence will sit drooping.

Polonius indeed describes the several stages of Hamlet's affliction. According to him, Hamlet

Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
Into the madness wherein he now raves.

We have thus in order, dejection, distaste for food, sleeplessness, imbecile conduct, delirious fancies, and raving madness. All this could not have been feigned. Many eminent alienists have discovered the signs of genuine lunacy in Hamlet. Dr. Ray points out that "the integrity of every train of reason is marred by some intrusion of disease", and draws attention to his 'bad dreams' and his insufferable behaviour towards Polonius and Ophelia. Dr Bucknill asserts that the tests of his sanity which he offers to his mother are not in the least inconsistent with madness. Hamlet's exhortation to secrecy suggests to Dr. Conolly the beginnings of insanity. Hamlet himself confesses weakness and melancholy in the soliloquy at the end of II. 11., and madness in his apology to Læertes in V. 11.

There is also, however, a considerable mass of evidence in favour of the view that Hamlet merely feigned insanity. In Saxo's original story, Hamlet feigns 'a foolish and grotesque madness,' all his actions "savouring of utter lethargy" in order to allay his uncle's suspicions, and Shakespeare might not have cared to transform the seeming insanity of the original hero

to a genuine madness in his play. There is also a great deal of deliberate indulgence by Hamlet in 'mad talk'. Deighton clinches the issue by stating that 'in every single instance in which Hamlet's madness is manifested, he has good reason for assuming that disguise: while on the other hand, wherever there was no need to hoodwink any one, his thought, language, and action, bear no resemblance to unsoundness of intellect.' It must also be observed that Hamlet is never mad to Horatio and that Horatio shows no signs of having thought of Hamlet as mad. There is lastly the objection that if Hamlet is really mad, he is not accountable for his actions, and the internal conflict in his mind, which is among the important ingredients of the tragic effect, will lose all significance.

The only possible view to take in the circumstance, is that advocated in the main by Bradley that Hamlet was not mad, but suffering from some kind of melancholia. It accounts for Hamlet's procrastination, his bad dreams, his disgust with life and sick longing for death and his moods of hysterical excitement. It accounts too for his inability to understand what is wrong with him. It absolves him at the same time from the taint of madness and makes him responsible for his action. The internal conflict in him gains a new significance as an effort to throw off the paralysing presence of the melancholy. On this subject of Hamlet's madness perhaps the best comment ever made is that of Dr. Bridges in his *Testament of Beauty*:

Hamlet himself would never have been aught to us, or we
to Hamlet, wer't not for the artful balance

whereby

Shakespeare so gingerly put his sanity in doubt
without the while confounding his Reason.

The Personal Element in *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare did not write autobiography when he wrote his plays. Nevertheless the game has often been played of guessing the poet's personality from his works. *Hamlet*, more than any other work, has tempted critics to estimate how far there is any revelation of Shakespeare's ideas and interests in his work. It is always a risky adventure, and Shakespeare's many-sided genius and talent for consistent, life-like characterization add to the dangers. Still on the principle that every creation of one's mind must, in some measure or other, reveal its texture, something may be said on the nature and extent of any self-revelation of the author that there may be in *Hamlet*.

In one of his provoking libels against Shakespeare Mr. Shaw contrasts the depressing cynicism of *Hamlet* with the tonic optimism of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is a stricture against the prevailing mood of the play: and the point to note is that there is a distinctive and unmistakable 'tone' in the play. *Hamlet* is a prophet of disenchantment and has all the savage cynicism of a disappointed idealist. *Timon* and *Troilus* belong to the same genius, but *Hamlet's* genius and greatness make his gospel of disgusted world-weariness all the more arresting. Is this mood a necessary element in the artistic make up of the play, or is it there because Shakespeare himself was giving expression through the play to a personal experience? It is difficult to answer the question definitely. On the one hand we have the evidence of the sonnets and a succession of dark tragedies to suggest that Shakespeare, at one time of his life, passed through a phase of bitter disillusionment. On the other, we have the picture of Shakespeare as a playwright, responding to popular moods, creating

tragedies when they were the fashion and switching on to tragi-comedies when they became the vogue. Were it not for the sonnets, the scales would certainly be weighted in favour of the hypothesis of an 'impersonal' Shakespeare. And the references to the contemporary theatre and the digressions on the arts of the playwright and actor found in *Hamlet* hint that Shakespeare was not above letting into the plays irrelevant and personal interests. It may therefore be inferred, not indeed with certainty but with a fair degree of probability that the picture of Hamlet's disillusionment and disgust with life gained in poignancy and life likeness from Shakespeare's own personal experience.

Even more important is Shakespeare's specific reference to the war of the theatres in Hamlet's talk with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. There is also a clear allusion to the Globe Theatre. Into the details of these allusions, it is not necessary to enter now. Suffice it to note that Shakespeare has introduced them irrelevantly and undramatically into his play. They indicate Shakespeare's interest in a passing controversy, but they do not unlock any secrets of his heart.

Critics have loved to dwell on Hamlet's talks with the players as giving us a clue for discovering Shakespeare's views on art and drama and acting. Let us consider in turn Hamlet's opinion on the passage describing the death of Priam and his instructions to the actors on their art. Hamlet considers the style of the passage as based on "an honest method, as wholesome, as sweet, and by very much more handsome than fine", and as free from affectation and ribaldry. The play from which it is taken was 'caviare to the general', but none the less it is "an excellent play, well-digested in scenes,

set down with as much modesty as cunning". And yet when we look at this much praised Aeneas' tale to Dido, we find it full of rant and bombast *a la* Marlowe. So the question arises: Are we to take Hamlet's criticism seriously and credit Shakespeare with bad taste, or was Shakespeare merely burlesquing the old playwrights? There is no agreement among those who have sought to answer this question. It may be suggested here that Hamlet's praise does not sound ironical and that if Shakespeare meant it to be so, he would have made his intention crystal clear. At the same time it is not necessary to accuse Shakespeare of faulty taste. For one thing Shakespeare had to distinguish the style of this play from his own. And of this style, it may well be said, as Coleridge did say, that we have here an "admirable substitution of the epic for the dramatic diction" and that "it is the language of lyric vehemence and epic pomp." Perhaps, as Prof. Dover Wilson suggests, Shakespeare admired with reservations the style and diction of an old play on Aeneas and Dido and set "out to show that he could better its style and criticise it at the same time." After all, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Shakespeare always took a boyish delight in bombast. Meaning the style to be grand and fine, he might have made it bombastic. But the speech is not all bombast either. It contains lines which even so discriminating a critic as Prof. Bradley regards as "unquestionably grand and free from any suspicion of bombast."

Let us now pass on to Hamlet's instructions to the actors in III. 11. He advises restrained but effective action and deprecates all extravagance and exaggeration, whether in action or in speech. He speaks contemptuously of "barren spectators" and "groundlings" of degraded taste, to satisfy whom is an artistic crime. He hates noise and

dumb-shows and irrelevant clowning. Here in a nutshell is his ideal impersonation: "suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature." Very probably here, as has been suggested, the Prince "is made the mouthpiece of criticisms of which the theatrical company at the Globe had doubtless often had the benefit. Shakespeare himself was an actor for many years, and played according to tradition the part of the ghost in *Hamlet*. Here may therefore probably be found his conception of good acting, derived from experience both as an actor and as playwright.

Hamlet incidentally dilates on the purpose of drama also. He declares the end of 'playing' (which includes the art of the playwright as well) to be "both at first and now ..to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of time his form and pressure". On this text a treatise on aesthetics can be written. It is an idea, as old as Aristotle, that the function of art is to 'imitate' nature. Shakespeare here echoes it in his own way. Art does not create in the void but must have reference to life and nature. And Shakespeares' art faithfully follows this dictum. Hamlet next refers to the necessity for art and especially drama to portray human character. Drama is not drama if it does not show character issuing in action. Lastly Hamlet considers drama to be 'topical'. Here is definite evidence against the theory of an 'impersonal' Shakespeare, heedless of topicality and creating for all time. Drama, according to Hamlet, is a representation of the manners and customs of one's age: actors "are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time". If Shakespeare looked upon drama in this light, we have a fruitful field of speculation as to the manner in which he sought in his

plays to show the very age and body of time his form and pressure". There is certainly a dramatic purpose in this meticulous harangue to the actors: for Hamlet wanted a definite dramatic effect. But it is scarcely conceivable that the noble and admirable Hamlet is here allowed to express opinions contrary to Shakespeare's own. And all the irrelevant and (to us) ununderstandable reference to contemporary stage gossip throws the spotlight on Shakespeare's own love of topicality'. The ghost controversy of the age, is faithfully mirrored in the play. There is perhaps an allusion to some notorious trial in the grave-diggers' discussion of the 'crown-er's, inquest on Ophelia. And Osric certainly had no ancient Danish parentage: he dates after Lyly.

There remains one question more. Is Hamlet the picture of some one Shakespeare had known? Attempts have been made to identify the Prince with Essex, Southampton, James I and so on. Such theories may be made to look plausible, but they belong to the category which can be neither proved nor disproved. At the most it may be said that "Shakespeare's knowledge of such a man may have provided the leaven of feeling which set working the creative ferment that produced *Hamlet*." But even here we are on uncertain ground. Shakespeare had an old play ready to work upon. He set out probably to adapt it for his actors and his audience, and transform it more or less unconsciously. His knowledge of men and his experience of life played their parts in the creation of Hamlet. To be more particular is to enter the realm of pure conjecture.

The Character of Hamlet

"Analysis of the character of Hamlet," writes Mr. Verity, "is the Ulysses' bow of criticism, which none has ever drawn to the full satisfaction of others or even

of himself." Some idea of the mass of literature on the subject is given in a separate essay. And a few of the intriguing problems raised by Shakespear's portraiture of Hamlet have also been discussed elsewhere. An attempt will be made here to draw an outline of Hamlet's elusive personality, based mainly on Bradley, though it must be confessed that, in spite of Bradley and an army of commentators, the Ulysses' bow still remains more or less undrawn.

Any attempt to estimate the character of Hamlet has to take note of the fact that the story of the play presents him throughout in a more or less morbid and abnormal state. We see him even at the beginning as the victim of a moral shock, wishing passionately that his 'too too sullied flesh' would melt. It is only indirectly and by way of inference that we have to make out the sort of man that Hamlet normally was. And the main problem of the play, why Hamlet delays his revenge, can be understood only after noting the difference that divides the two Hamlets, the Hamlet before and the Hamlet after the shock.

(i) Hamlet Before the Shock.

Let us now try to form a picture of Hamlet as he was at the beginning of the play. The Prince was then a young man of thirty. He had been educated at Wittenburg, of which he still retained happy memories. After his studies at the University he resided for some time at his father's court at Elsinore, undergoing military training and cultivating social accomplishments. Ophelia speaks of him as having the "courtier's scholar's eye, tongue and sword", and describes him as,

"The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers"

If her account is deemed biassed, we have at least the independent testimony of Fortinbras to indicate that it rested well on truth and that Hamlet was likely, had he been put on, to have proved most royally. And in the fencing match in the last act, Hamlet shows himself an opponent worthy of the steel of Læertes, the typical man of action in the play. He had also earned the love and admiration of the masses, and this proved, as the King himself admits in iv. 7, a formidable obstacle against the successful execution of his designs against Hamlet.

It is also clear that the essential Hamlet must have been at this time an idealist, having passionate faith in the goodness of human nature and the possibilities of its development. In one of the most thrilling passages of prose in English literature, Hamlet gives undying expression to his former faith and present disillusionment. Says Prof. Bradley: "He had the soul of the youthful poet, as Shelley and Tennyson have described it, an unbounded faith and delight in everything true and beautiful." It is this idealism which made him adore his father, almost this side of idolatry. He must have held his mother in equally high regard, until he saw, with unbelieving eyes, her shameless fall from grace. Even the shrewd Claudius bases his trap for Hamlet on the latter being 'most generous and free from all contriving'

Not that Hamlet was a fool, the dupe of every passable scoundrel. He had intellectual genius of a high order. "It shows itself," writes Prof. Bradley fitfully "in the affairs of life as unusual quickness of perception, great agility in shifting the mental attitude, a striking rapidity and fertility in resource: so that, when his natural belief in others does not make him unwary, Hamlet easily sees through them and masters them. It shows itself in conversation chiefly in the form of wit or

humour; and alike in conversation and soliloquy, it shows itself in the form of imagination quite as much as in that of thought in the stricter sense."

Hamlet must also have had the speculative habit of mind. Indeed, according to one school of critics this gift of his proved his ruin. He had a passion for generalisation, a tendency to speculative meditation. His mother's incestuous wedlock makes "all the uses of this world" seem to him "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable." One woman, his mother, sins, and for him the whole of womankind becomes stained and tainted. From that single example, he proceeds to generalise: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" If we may quote Bradley again: "There was a necessity in his soul driving him to penetrate below the surface and to question what others took for granted. That fixed habitual look which the world wears for most men did not exist for him. He was forever unmaking his world and rebuilding it in thought, dissolving what to others were solid facts and discovering what to others were old truths."

Lastly, Hamlet must have at this time been genuinely in love with Ophelia. His letter to Ophelia, which Polonius reads before the king, shows him in the first flush of the tender emotion, rhapsodising and poetising. His love must have been intense and sincere, though perhaps it was something of a self-love. Ophelia speaks of his having made many 'tenders of his affection' to her and of his having sworn his love 'with almost all the holy vows of heaven.' She has received from him many 'remembrances,' which she longs to redeliver to him, in the nunnery scene. Hamlet himself admits twice, once in the nunnery scene and again in the grave-diggers' scene, his having loved her. There is thus every reason to believe that the romance between Hamlet and Ophelia would have progressed smoothly and culminated

in a marriage, but for the stern intervention of tragic destiny, which furnished at the end of the play such a grim feast of death to the eyes of Fortinbras.

(ii) The Beginnings of Melancholia and Depression.

Such then was Hamlet, young and accomplished, scholar and soldier, idealist and lover. Given the ordinary chances of life, Hamlet would have married Ophelia and ruled as a popular king over his people. But that was not to be. Some two months before the commencement of the play, Hamlet's father dies suddenly. It is given out that he was 'bitten by a venomous snake, while sleeping in the orchard, of an afternoon. The sudden death of a beloved parent must have overwhelmed Hamlet with grief: but it would not have made him persist in obstinate condolence, were it not for what happened soon afterwards. Within a month of the death of the king, his brother Claudius marries the widowed queen and ascends the throne. Claudius, there is reason to think, was never Hamlet's favourite. His oleaginous smile always jarred on his nephew's nerves, and Hamlet now has an additional cause for hating him, in deprivation of the throne. He describes his uncle to his mother as

A cutpurse of the empire and the rule
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole
And put it in his pocket: (iii.4)

and refers elsewhere to Claudius having 'popp'd in between the election and his (Hamlet's) hopes.' Far outweighing this cause for enmity was the fact that Claudius married Gertrude. Both according to civil and ecclesiastical law, the union was incestuous. Hamlet received the first agonising shock of his young life, when he saw his mother marrying in indecent haste his despicable

uncle The realisation of the true nature of his mother infects him with a morbid cynicism and a sick disgust with life. He becomes subject to melancholia and depression of spirits.

This is the state in which we find him at the beginning of the play. In the Privy Council Scene, where we see him for the first time, he stands aloof with Olympian dignity from the crowd of sycophants who approved of an illegal usurpation and a marriage shocking alike to morality and law. Dressed in sombre mourning and looking grave and serious. Hamlet must have struck a jarring note in that festive assembly gathered to congratulate the King on the double felicity of his marriage and his coronation. He has already applied for permission to return to the more congenial atmosphere of Wittenburg, and the bitter pun that he makes, in the first words that he speaks ("A little more than kin and less than kind") lifts the veil off for a moment from the dark joylessness of his heart. However, he still remains normal, though badly shaken. He listens patiently to his uncle's sermon on the duty of reconciliation with the dispensations of Providence and gives a reluctant assent to the King's more or less mandatory request to stay.

Once the Council disperses, Hamlet finds himself alone and the mask slips off his face. In the first soliloquy, we get a glimpse of the cynicism that has taken the place of his frustrated idealism. The world seems to him a rank and

' unweeded garden
That grows to seed.'

His mother's incest fills him with a loathing which he cannot even express. He feels himself of corrupt stock, being flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone. He is

still, however, a great distance from derangement of mind. For he greets warmly Horatio and his companions, when they interrupt his soliloquy, and except for a slight bitterness on the question of his mother's marriage, seems perfectly normal in his speech and behaviour. The news about his father's ghost haunting the battlements of the castle at Elsinore distrubs him, but it does not undermine the foundations of his reason. He foresees trouble and turmoil, but has no idea of the full horror of the revelation about to be made

The succeeding night Hamlet keeps his tryst with his friends. He has to wait for some time before the ghost appears, and in his brief interval, we get another glimpse of the happier Hamlet. Characteristically, Hamlet expresses his disgust at his uncle's drunkenness and then passes off to discuss the national weakness for alcoholic beverages, and finally ends with a generalisation on the effect of a single vice on a whole host of virtues. At length, however, the ghost appears, and when it invites him to a conference apart Hamlet shows by his quick decision and instant action how little he resembles what Coleridge saw in him. Fearful of what may befall him, his friends try to prevent him from following the ghost. But Hamlet has made his decision and would allow no one to stand in his way. Curtly and decisively he declares :

Still am I call'd : unhand me, gentlemen ;
By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me

In that conference, however, Hamlet comes near the brink of insanity. The revelation by the ghost of his father's murder and mother's adultery so far exceeds any vision of wickedness that he had imagined, that the world which his generous nature, free from all contriving, had erected out of youthful idealism, falls

around him in ruins. This second shock, coming as it does before the effects of the first have worn off, makes his reason totter and reel. He feels his sinews dissolving and his heart sinking into annihilation.

(iii) On the Verge of Insanity

And when after a gigantic effort, he consecrates his life solemnly to the task of revenge, we find that his will has suffered almost irreparable damage in the effort. An involuntary and hysterical excitement possesses him, and the wild and whirling words which he speaks to Horatio are for the most part the natural expression of an uncontrollable agitation. Hamlet pretends that it is assumed and tries so to colour his hysteria as to make it seem the offshoot of a mysterious conference with a powerful devil. And the ghost plays up to this game and sees to it that Hamlet extracts from his companions grim oaths of secrecy in the presence of supernatural witness. Immediately afterwards, Hamlet is overcome with depression and 'within an hour of the moment when he vowed to give his life to the duty of revenge,' he exclaims :

The time is out of joint ! O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right

Here is the first hint that all is not well with Hamlet's mind. We see sudden and involuntary alternations in mood, a change first from the solemnity of dedication to the wild hysteria of a conjurer's role and thence to a world-weariness born of a sense of a burden too heavy to be borne. Such oscillations between passion and tranquillity, excitement and depression, occur in several more places in the play.

Ophelia in the first scene of the second act gives us a picture of a Hamlet emerging from an almost delirious

fit of excitement, and we see him lashing himself up to hysteria in the 'rogue and peasant slave' soliloquy and the nunnery scene. Then again there is his wild harangue to his mother in the bed-room scene, succeeded, after the arrival of the ghost, by forty lines of tenderness and tranquillity. The pendulum again swings to the extreme of disgust and loathing when the thought comes of the connubial relations that subsist between his mother and uncle. The exaltation at the end of the play-scene shows a similar lack of balance, and in the grave-diggers' scene, Hamlet gives yet another exhibition of his 'sore distraction.'

It is clear, therefore, that Hamlet comes out of his conference with the ghost with his reason still secure, but hurt in its vitals. And Hamlet judges rightly, when on the impulse of the moment he warns his companions that he may find it necessary to put on an 'antic disposition' in the future. It is not so much an excuse for a pretence as an explanation in advance for possible outbursts which he may not be able to control.

It is also necessary to note here the complication caused in Hamlet's mind by the existence of genuine doubts about the 'honesty' of the ghost. His whole being feels raw and sore after the ghost's revelation. The shock of that fateful interview probably induces a conditioned reflex, which inhibits action in the one direction in which his sense of duty eggs him on to act. At the same time, however, he hopes for an escape from the nightmare universe into which he has been thrust by doubting, with true Protestant conviction, whether the apparition that he saw may not be a 'goblin damned.'

We see Hamlet next through Ophelia's eyes. The time is two months later, and we get some idea of the startling transformation that has taken place in this

interval from Ophelia's description of her almost terrifying interview with Hamlet. He visits her in the garb of a regular lunatic with an awe-inspiring expression on his face,

As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors

Perhaps Hamlet makes one last, mute appeal for help and understanding in his difficulties. She reacts not so much with sympathy as fear. And so, for Hamlet, she is tested and found wanting. He takes a last, pathetic farewell of her as a lover, and always afterwards treats her with scorn or cruel raillery. His love for her springs up again only at her graveside.

Meanwhile the King too gets anxious about Hamlet's eccentricities and sends for two of the Prince's school-fellows to probe the secret of his heart. Three theories are now in the air to explain the change in Hamlet. Gertrude thinks that his father's death and her overhasty marriage has plunged him into gloom. The King suspects that disappointed ambition may be at the root of the trouble. And Polonius concludes that Ophelia's rejection, under his advice, of Hamlet's suit made him mad. And if we wonder what Hamlet was doing in the two months since he dedicated his life to revenge, Polonius gives us some answer. He details the progress of Hamlet's malady. First, he

Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and by this declension
Into the madness wherein now he raves.

Not all of this could have been pretence. The ghost left his reason only the laurels of a Pyrrhic victory. He might have exaggerated his ailment and fooled Polonius

to the top of his bent, but there was a core of truth in it after all.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern now arrive on the scene, and there is a flash of the old Hamlet in the warmth of his greetings towards his school-fellows. But Hamlet's mind is now clouded with suspicion, and very soon he worms out their secret. Not, however, before he makes a confession of faith and details the symptoms of his malady—listlessness, lassitude, world-weariness and bad dreams.

The mention of the strolling players rouses Hamlet's interests at once. and when they arrive, he is his old self again happily reminiscent over old stage memories. The recital by the first player of the passage describing the death of Priam moves Hamlet deeply, and it is all he can do to keep control over himself in the presence of all. When he is left alone, he lashes himself into a fury of self reproach at his remissness in carrying out the duty of revenge. In the heat of his passion he can think of no other explanation for this than that he is a coward. But soon he realises the force his theological objections to the ghost, admits in passing his weakness and melancholy, and improvises, on yet another passing impulse, the crucial test of the play-scene.

But the morrow sees him in a different mood. A fit of suicidal melancholy possesses him, and he debates seriously whether life with its certain ills is to be preferred to the unknown terrors of the grave. And it is in this moment of uttermost depression of spirits that Ophelia tries to draw him out for the benefit of eaves-dropping Claudius and Polonius. Perhaps Hamlet sees the 'lawful espials': perhaps the crime of his mother makes him savage with Ophelia. Whatever the cause, there is a swift change of mood from suicidal melancholy

to savage fury. In a torrential stream of venomous invective, he indicts the whole sex of women, and treats Ophelia as a prostitute. It is the disappointed idealist who is the most uncompromising cynic.

Hamlet is next presented to us giving instructions to the players on the art of acting. His pulse now beats to healthful music and he speaks with self forgetful interest on art and drama and acting. His taste is impeccable and judgement excellent. Nothing finer has been said on the subject since Aristotle. Incidentally Hamlet has a definite object in holding this class. He desires that the dozen or sixteen lines that he has composed should be spoken naturally, effectively and without flamboyant gestures of any kind. Otherwise his whole plan may miscarry.

Comes then a brief interlude with Horatio, where Hamlet reveals that his love for Horatio is, in part at least, due to the fact that the latter is not 'passion's slave,' and has taken 'with equal thanks fortune's buffets and rewards.' Hamlet then begs his friend to observe the King closely, when a particular scene, which comes near the circumstance of his father's death, is played. The play then begins, and Hamlet is on the alert.

The whole scene is a revelation of his wonderful flexibility of his mind and his amazing gift for improvisation on the spur of the moment. The actors almost spoil his scheme by staging first a summary of the play in dumb-show: but, fortunately, the King and Queen fail to observe it. The actual drama then commences, and we have a monarch and his spouse discussing their love. The former is afraid that he may die soon, and advises his queen to remarry. The latter swears eternal constancy and rejects with scorn even the very thought of a second marriage. The King (of the play) being worldly-wise,

is sceptical and even the embarrassed Gertude comments, half in jest and half in earnest: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." The king then goes to sleep, and the queen leaves him alone,

Claudius, at this stage, gets uncomfortable and asks Hamlet whether there is no offence in the play. Hamlet replies in the negative, but flashes for a brief moment the claws of his trap by a seemingly casual reference to poison. A knavish piece of work will presently be shown, but it cannot touch those that have a free soul. The nephew of the king in the play then pours poison in his uncle's ear, and Claudius loses all control over himself. He orders the play to cease and leaves the palace theatre abruptly. Fortunately for him, the court interprets the anger of the King to be due to mad Hamlet's offensive portraiture of a second marriage and a silly threat of regicide by a nephew against his royal uncle. Hamlet is jubilant at the success of his scheme and lets himself go with almost hysterical lack of balance.

He is then bidden by Polonius to meet his mother in her chamber. And on his way, he finds the King all alone praying. He has a capital opportunity for carrying out his revenge. He has no longer any doubts about the King's crime. Yet after lifting the hand to strike, he returns the sword to its sheath, apparently because by killing Claudius at prayer, he may send his soul to heaven. It is one of Shakespeare's classic instances of dramatic irony that the King, as a matter of fact, is not communing with God at the moment. All his efforts at prayer prove unavailing: he finds he cannot pray.

Is it one of Hamlet's pretexts for delay, a false reason which he finds, for some mysterious inhibition, paralysing his will to act? Partly it may be due to the damage suffered by his will; in the shock at the

ghost's revelation. In part at least, however, Hamlet must be giving expression, to his real feelings. For, in the sixteenth century, the hereafter played a greater part in men's lives than in the twentieth. And just as Hamlet considered the question of the fate of his soul beyond the grave when contemplating suicide, he very naturally took into account the probable destination of the soul of Claudius, when contemplating his assassination.

The King now gains the upper hand. He knows that Hamlet is in possession of the dread secret of his crime, and he immediately arranges to send him away to England and to death. And Hamlet most unluckily plays into his hands. While interviewing his mother, he hears Polonius behind the arras, and mistaking him for his uncle, he swiftly runs him through. This tragic and costly error does not disturb him. For he is in one of his moods of passionate excitement and unpacks his heart with words of fire to his mother. It is the intervention of the ghost that saves Gertrude from the knowledge of the King's fratricide and restores Hamlet's pulse to its healthful music. But not for long. The thought of the intimate relations that subsist between his mother and uncle makes Hamlet once again delirious with excitement. He warns his mother that he is but 'mad in craft', tells her that he is aware of his uncle's plan to send him to England and declares that it is good sport to see the engineer hoist with his own petard.

The initiative now passes to the King. He acts, and acts immediately. The assassination of Polonius furnishes him with a convenient excuse for sending Hamlet away from Denmark to England, and the King takes the opportunity of addressing a secret letter to the King of England to put him to death. On the way to the sea, Hamlet meets a platoon of soldiers from the

army of Fortinbras, marching to fight with Poland, more or less on a question of honour. The contrast between their eagerness to act and his own remissness strikes him forcibly and makes him introspective.

(iv) Signs of Returning Normality.

While sailing to England he discovers the secret letter and substitutes in its stead another, ordering the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. His ship is then attacked by pirates, and Hamlet, doubtless acting on impulse, boards the enemy vessel first, and before a regular engagement takes place, it gets clear and moves away with Hamlet. Being 'thieves of mercy' the pirates set him down on the shore at Denmark and he sends two communications, one to Horatio and the other to the King.

Later, he is met by Horatio and returns to Elsinore on the day of Ophelia's funeral. The grave is being dug, when he arrives at the churchyard, and presently the funeral cortege arrives. His conversation with the grave diggers shows that there are signs of returning normality in him, but the extravagant display of grief by Læertes offends his taste and brings on another feverish fit of excitement. There is an unseemly quarrel with Læertes in the grave, and the Queen can only plead in excuse of her son's conduct that he is mad. Hamlet himself soon recovers self-possession and makes an unsatisfactory apology to Læertes.

Hamlet is next shown in a different mood. He is exchanging confidences with Horatio and relates the story of his discovery of the king's secret letter. Hamlet is now feeling himself more or less as an instrument in the hands of God. And even while he is declaring his readiness to fulfil the duty of revenge cast on him the

plan hatched by his two deadly enemies, Claudius and Læertes, to murder him, swiftly materialises. Osric invites Hamlet to a fencing-match with Læertes, and in spite of a presentiment of evil, he consents.

The opponents are about equally matched, and when Læertes commits a 'foul' to wound him with the poisoned sword, Hamlet seizes the treacherous weapon and wounds Læertes in turn. Meanwhile the Queen lies dying, having drunk the poisoned wine intended by her husband for her son. The whole infamous conspiracy then becomes clear to Hamlet, and for once he acts swiftly, decisively and adequately. He kills Claudius, bids adieu to his mother, forgives Læertes, stops Horatio's attempt at suicide, arranges for the succession to the state and for his true story being told to posterity, and dies. "The rest is silence," so run his last words. But Horatio adds a postscript:

"Goodnight, sweet prince !
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

Such is the story of Hamlet, as told by Shakespeare. It makes many aspects of Hamlet's character clear—his intellectual genius, his moral sensibility, his artistic insight, and his faith in human nature. But the central problem of Hamlet, why he delays, still offers scope for speculation. There is truth in the suggestion made that the delay is necessary for the plot, but this does not explain whether Shakespeare has justified it. And the story as detailed above certainly indicates that the character of Hamlet is much more complex than it is conceived by Goethe or Coleridge.

Hamlet is not the delicate and sheltered idealist of Goethe's picture: his brutality towards Ophelia, the callousness with which he sends Rosencrantz and

Guildestern to their doom, and his indifference at the death of Polonius, prove that. Nor is he the speculative philosopher of Coleridge's dreams, who 'vacillates from sensibility and procrastinates from thought and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve.' Think of the Hamlet who thrust aside Horatio, when he barred the way to a conference with the ghost, or the Hamlet who contrived the 'changeling letter,' boarded the pirate ship, leapt into Ophelia's grave and figured as the Avenging Destiny of the fifth act.

Hamlet is certainly introspective, and takes an almost painful interest in dissecting his mind and feelings. But, as Prof. Bradley points out, that is less a congenital weakness than the system of a disease. Properly to estimate Hamlet, we must understand how this disease begins and runs its course. It is clear that the shock of his mother's second marriage weakens him into a state of melancholy and that the further shock of the ghost's revelation carries him still farther down the road which connects melancholia with insanity. Between his first and second meetings with the ghost, Hamlet himself confesses that he spends most of his time 'lapsed in time and passion.' Until the end of the play-scene, Hamlet's vacillation is at least in part due to real doubts about the honesty of the ghost.

The grand problem of *Hamlet* is how much true delay there is in the scheme of the play. Even from the beginning of the play, Hamlet is in an abnormal state of mind. The vital centres of his inner life are poisoned by noxious thoughts about the rottenness of his flesh, the foulness of the world and the desirability of death. The disease becomes more marked after the revelation of the ghost and lingers on without any possibility of disguise after the decisive test of the play-scene. Whether a paralysis of the will is inevitable

in the circumstances in which Hamlet is placed is a different question altogether. Prof. Bradley's picture of Hamlet's melancholy is convincing, and accounts satisfactorily both for his remissness in carrying out his duty and his convulsive spurts of effective action.

It has been suggested that Hamlet suffers from specific aboulia, *i. e.*, inability to act in one particular direction. We may say that Hamlet's reflex of revenge is conditioned by the shock of the ghost's revelation. In other words, the unconscious impressions left by that shock mysteriously inhibit action, whenever the thought of revenge rises in his mind. This may or may not be an adequate psychological explanation, but even if it is inadequate it does not matter. For Hamlet is not a problem in psychology. Shakespeare wrote a tragedy, and sought to raise tragic emotions in those who witnessed it. For this purpose he created a hero, labouring under a burden too heavy to be borne even by his mighty shoulders. And when witnessing the play, we feel no insuperable obstacle hindering our understanding of the hero.

Both in his vacillations and impulsive fits of action, Hamlet appears real and human. We see his greatness as well as his inadequacy to the task laid on him. We see him struggling against his weakness, and the struggle does not always seem hopeless. We see him finally dying, but bringing with his death destruction to the evil that overwhelmed him. We feel his great gifts going to waste, without benefiting himself or his people, and we wonder at the mysterious dispensations of Providence and the might and helplessness of the human spirit. As Prof. Bradley observes, Hamlet 'brings home to us at once the sense of the soul's infinity and the sense of doom which not only circumscribes that infinity but

appears to be its offspring.' It is enough for Shakespeare's purpose, if this impression is created, if we are made to feel, as we do feel, that by carrying the stamp of one defect, men's virtues,

be they true as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault: the dram of eale
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
To his own scandal.

To consider the character of Hamlet more curiously is perhaps a futile and even improper pastime. Let us be content that in the portraiture of Hamlet, Shakespeare's

touch is infinite and lends
A yonder to all ends.

Soliloquy in *Hamlet*.

The soliloquy is a device employed by dramatists from the beginnings of drama and in almost every civilised country. It has of late become unpopular with playwrights on account of its alleged artificiality. In one sense it is undoubtedly artificial, but then so is drama as well. Drama as an art rests on convention. We are asked to merge the identity of the actors in the characters whom they represent. We look upon the style of the conversation, whether in stilted prose or in rhyme or in blank verse, as natural. When witnessing an opera. (or a South Indian talkie or drama) we are all prepared to believe in music being the medium of conversation. It may be possible to grade the conventions on which drama is based according to the degrees of their artificiality, but all of them are in the last analysis suppliants for our faith.

Soliloquy, then, however unreal and unnatural it may seem in the real world in which we live and labour, need not be out of place in the conventional world of the drama. We may, if we like, distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate uses of the soliloquy, but soliloquy itself is a device which cannot be condemned out of hand. For dramatic revelation of one's innermost thoughts, no other device known to playwrights appears so useful or satisfactory. The prejudice of the modern drama against soliloquy as such has resulted in the door being closed against all varieties of self-revelation.

The legitimate use of soliloquy, we may say, is to give us an insight into the thoughts and motives of action of the principle *dramatis personae*. It helps particularly in the representation of psychological struggles, of a divided self striving to choose between two courses of action. If soliloquy, however, is used for the purpose of giving to the audience information which they do not know, but which the character indulging in soliloquy may be expected to know, then the convention appears to be stretched beyond normal limits of acceptance. A soliloquising character should not be equated with a chorus presenter or an expository Prologue.

In *Hamlet*, particularly, the design of the play makes the use of the soliloquy more or less inevitable. The dramatist here seeks to portray the soul of the hero. Some at least of Hamlet's thoughts baffle expression. The loathing and disgust which he feels at the incest of his mother, he dares not express even to himself. The censor, to adopt the language of psycho-analysis, pushes such thoughts down into the unconscious. No alternative device known to drama can convey, for instance, just such an effect as Hamlet's first soliloquy in the Privy-Council scene. It cannot be spoken even to the dearest

confidante, it cannot be recorded even in the pages of an intimate diary.

Take again the picture of extreme depression of spirits, suggested by Hamlet's famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy. One cannot debate even with one's dearest friend the desirability of committing suicide. The 'rogue and peasant slave' soliloquy and the Fortinbras soliloquy are instances of searching, introspective analysis, and they too illustrate some of the legitimate uses of this artistic device. The genesis of the plan for testing the King by means of a play is clearly indicated in the 'rogue and peasant slave' soliloquy.

Yet another instance of a soliloquy which cannot be dispensed with is the King's prayer. Here Claudius makes a full confession of his crime, and we cannot expect a murderer to confess before an audience even of one. And how effectively does this confession reinforce the proof of the play-scene, and set in bold relief Hamlet's vacillation!

There can thus be little doubt that Shakespeare uses the soliloquy effectively and artistically in *Hamlet*. Nowhere does it seem out of place or palpably artificial. Indeed in practically every instance it appears inevitable and necessary. Considered in the light of Shakespeare's example, the modern antipathy to soliloquy appears a little overdone. By rejecting the soliloquy the dramatist denies himself the only possible instrument of intimate self-revelation, of the expression of thoughts which one may not dare fully and clearly to express even to one's self. It is difficult to see how in the absence of the soliloquy, the artistic effect of *Hamlet* can be achieved. If *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark is the husk without the grain, the Prince of Denmark

without his soliloquies will be an elusive shadow, a character without personality or individuality.

Discuss how far the Tragedy is really due to the Weakness of the Two Women Characters in the Play.

The chivalrous French have a saying, not quite so chivalrous—*Cherchez la femme*. And if we are to look for a woman whenever there is trouble of any kind, it is easy enough to fix the responsibility for the tragedy of Hamlet on Ophelia and Gertrude. It may be epigrammatic and witty so to do, but human tragedies generally and Shakespeare's tragic plays particularly are complex affairs, and need a more comprehensive formula—if at all a formula can be found—for discovering the cause of the catastrophe. Ophelia and Gertrude have their parts to play in bringing about the grim disaster which overtakes Hamlet and includes them in its scope, but they are neither the sole nor even the principal causes thereof. In Shakespeare they say, character is destiny, and no attempt to account for the tragedy which ignores Hamlet's own major contribution thereto can be deemed satisfactory.

Ophelia, in particular, plays a very minor part in the play. She is anonymous in the original of Saxo and comes in merely as a decoy to test the truth of the hero's madness. She has a more important rôle to fulfil in Shakespeare's scheme, but one has to lose all sense of proportion before one can call her a principal cause of Hamlet's ruin. She is weak, it is true deplorably weak. She fails her lover, when perhaps he needs her most: "perhaps," as Dr. Bradley suggests, "she is so near childhood that old affections have still the strongest hold."

The part that fate assigned to her in the tragic drama was more or less a negative one. She sins, if at all, by omission. "If she had been an Imogen, a Cordelia, even

a Portia or a Juliet," speculates Prof. Bradley, "the story must have taken another shape. Hamlet would either have been stimulated, or (which is more likely) he would have gone mad or (which is likeliest) he would have killed himself in despair." The head and front of her offending then is that she was not strong enough to invite Hamlet's confidences, learn his dread secret and influence him to do his duty.

And yet given Ophelia as she is, would not a different Hamlet, as easy to convince and quick to act as Othello, have carried out the vendetta against Claudius at less cost to himself and others? Even Dr. Bradley admits that Hamlet did not feel for Ophelia a passion so vehement or profound as to interfere with the main motive of the play. It is also true that her madness and death stimulate the enmity of Læertes and make him the instrument of Hamlet's doom. Yet to make Ophelia the cause of the tragedy, because she failed to do what she could not do, or because her death under tragic circumstances accentuated the ill-feelings between her brother and her lover is to ignore 'the causal connection of character, deed and catastrophe', which is an essential element of Shakesperean tragedy.

Gertude stands on a different footing altogether. She has more share in the uprise of evil in the tragic world, and on her devoted head all woman-hating moralists may lay the blame for all that happens in Hamlet. Yet even this view fails to be adequate, on a closer examination, despite its satisfying our sence of outraged moral propriety. Shakespeare does not set out to portray in his tragedies a world governed by poetic justice, where 'prosperity and adversity are distributed in proportion to the merits of the agents.' The moral of *Hamlet* is not the showing up of Gertrude as a terrible example, though the story shows her sinning and suffering for

her sin. She is not the source of evil in the play though she has an important part to play in starting the convulsion that crashes to their doom the houses of Hamlet and Polonius.

Accurately to fix her responsibility, we must analyse her crime in some detail. The ghost makes it fairly clear that she was unfaithful to her first husband even during his life-time. Marriage with Claudius merely meant for her regularising of an 'affair' that had gone on illicitly for a long time. It is not easy to say who took the initiative in the matter. The ghost throws the responsibility on Claudius, and alleges that 'with the witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,' he won her 'to his shameful lust.' The ghost however is somewhat of a prejudiced witness and is always too tender towards Gertrude's imperfections.

The impression that she makes on a reader of the play is one of heavy sensuality and not of adventurous voluptuousness. She appears to be the sort who always takes the line of least resistance. She may have succumbed to temptation, but it is difficult to believe that she deliberately undertook to bewitch Claudius and succeeded in making a 'conquest' of him. Of the more heinous crime of murder, it is fairly certain that she was not guilty. The first quarto makes her innocence clear beyond doubt, and even according to the received text of the second quarto, her expression of amazement as Hamlet's allusion to murder leads more or less to the same conclusion. She was ready enough to participate in a sordid intrigue, but the vaulting ambition of Claudius and his genius for crime were beyond her 'star.'

There remains one further question. How far did his love for Gertrude instigate Claudius to fratricide?

In that one glimpse which we get of his soul, when he tries vainly to pray for forgiveness, he enumerates the 'effects' for which he did the murder—his crown, his ambition and his queen. The crown of Denmark heads the list and is, as it were, duplicated by the reference to his ambition. It is true that Claudius loves Gertrude with as much feeling as he is capable of, but it is not strong enough or deep enough to cause a *crime passionnel*. If Gertrude had not been the wife of the King, the clandestine intrigue might have gone on merrily until such time as he tired of her. And if even there had been no such intrigue, he might have murdered his brother to get the throne. If however, as Prof. Dover Wilson suggests, Claudius ascended the throne by some legal quibbling over his rights as the husband of an imperial jointress, Gertrude might have indirectly facilitated the crime. But the efficient ruthlessness of Claudius might not have been deterred from murder, even if Gertrude had been chaste as snow.

Claudius then is the principal force of evil in the tragic world of *Hamlet*. Gertrude is less an active auxiliary than a victim, caught in his net. But it may be urged that her weakness debilitates Hamlet and makes him unfit for his crusade against Claudius. That is undoubtedly true. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that her weakness need not necessarily have led to a tragedy of this kind. And before we fix on Gertrude the responsibility for all that long tale of woe,

Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of death put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook,
Fall'n on the inventors' heads,

we must be certain that the whole train of disaster sprang directly and inevitably from her sin.

The tragedy of Hamlet then is the resultant of many contending forces. The weakness of Gertrude and Ophelia threads the mosaic, but is not the whole of the warp and the woof. The sin of Claudius is in the foreground, but what occupies the centre of the design is that mixture of greatness and weakness which makes of Hamlet a tragic hero. To produce the tragedy of *Hamlet* we must have just such a hero as Hamlet, placed in just the one set of circumstances when his great endowments become his enemies and deny him success in his war with evil, except at the cost of his life and the lives of many others, guilty as well as innocent. To trace it simply to the weakness of Ophelia and the matrimonial unfaithfulness of Gertrude is to degrade the sovereign art of Shakespeare to a misanthrope's sermon on the theme, "Frailty, thy name is woman!"

The Madness of Hamlet as contrasted with the Madness of Ophelia.

Elsewhere will be found a short study of Hamlet's madness. Conflicting opinions have been expressed on the subject, but the view generally accepted after Prof. Bradley's truly monumental lectures on Shakesperean tragedy is that Hamlet was, while preserving a precarious sanity throughout the play, subject to recurring fits of hysterical excitement and deadly depression of spirits, and that he was on the whole no far, though some distance away, from madness. The antic disposition, while helping to disguise Hamlet's involuntary and occasional lack of balance, is still for the most part a mask put on and off for playing with Polonius, teasing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and puzzling and frightening Claudius. That is why Polonius speaks of

the method in Hamlet's madness and the Prince himself declares that he is but mad nor'-nor'-west.

Contrast this with the course of Ophelia's disease. The attack is swift and its effect complete. Her father's sudden and mysterious death, following swiftly upon her lover's madness, unhinges her reason. Hers is a frail spirit, and we see in the all too easy fall of her reason, an implicit contrast with the strength of Hamlet, whose reason battles till the end. She does not even know that her lover killed her father. The poet spares her that knowledge, as though it might be too cruel for her flower-like grace. And if so much is enough for unbinging human reason, what excuse does Hamlet lack for his vacillations and delays? He had to withstand a more terrible shock and fulfil a duty, at all times difficult and in the circumstances almost impossible of accomplishment. That he does fulfil this duty at the end though at great cost to himself and others, is a tribute to the might of his spirit.

There is incidentally no doubt about the truth of her malady. Observe the art with which Shakespeare distinguishes the true incoherence of madness from a conscious attempt to produce that effect. Ophelia's prattle is disconnected and more or less pointless, but through it all there runs a note of inconsolable grief at the death of her father. Hamlet's 'mad' talk is of a different kind. If one is careful, one can note its purposiveness. He plays the part of a jilted lover before Polonius, acts the ambitious and disappointed heir with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and becomes a standing reminder of her sleeping mentor to his mother. His speech is deliberately incoherent, but it creates the effect which he desires.

Poor Ophelia does not change with her audience. The mild obscenity of one of her songs, at which some critics have taken umbrage, is only an indication of the extent of her loss of control over her reason. She found Hamlet's broad jokes in the play-scene embarrassing, but she could sing before them all a frank song about the ways of a man with a maid.

Hamlet is mad, if at all, only in his fits of delirious excitement and in the moods of sick longing for death. We see then, not actual madness, but a hysterical lack of balance, a mood which often affects sane men, but which in his case tries to overstep normal limits. Ophelia's madness runs a level and even course. There are no stormy interruptions, no moods of passionate excitement or suicidal melancholy. She is pathetically, harmlessly mad.

Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself,
She turns to favour and to prettiness.

She is a butterfly broken on the relentless wheel of Tragic Destiny, but the presiding power treats her with as much consideration as is possible under the circumstances.

Though Læertes and Hamlet find themselves placed in almost identical situations, they react differently because of temperamental differences.

Læertes acts throughout the play as a foil to Hamlet. We get our first glimpse of both, when they are presented together in the Privy-Council scene. Læertes then appears gaily dressed and bent for the gay capital of France. Hamlet is attired in mourning and his thoughts are for the studious atmosphere of Wittenburg. Læertes succeeds in his suit, but Hamlet fails in his. We

are shown immediately afterwards the clouds that hang on the soul of Hamlet and infect him with disgust for life. Hamlet is at that time an idealist turned cynic. Simultaneously, perhaps, Lærtès is bidding farewell to his sister, and we see in his advice to his sister cynicism of a different sort—the cynicism of a man, who looks on the world with crafty, worldly eyes. He takes the wickedness of men for granted, and looks like one who will be surprised at goodness

The awful revelation of the ghost shakes Hamlet to the foundations of his being and shatters his faith in man and God. It is interesting to speculate what Lærtès would have done in the face of such a revelation. Probably the vision of terror and sin that paralyses Hamlet's will to action and all but unhinges his sovereign reason would never have ment much for Lærtès. He would have gone for Claudius, without facing any of the spiritual difficulties of Hamlet. Hamlet's soul is of a finer texture and therefore more liable to damage than that of Lærtès.

When Lærtès returns from France, his position is analogous to that of Hamlet. His father has died under mysterious circumstances, and he has suspicions about Claudius being the author of the crime. And yet compared with Hamlet, his incentive to revenge is much less strong. Hamlet can have no manner of doubt about the manner in which his father met with his death and the identity of the man who committed the foul murder. Yet he hesitates to act. But Lærtès, who has only doubts both about the nature of his father's death and the guilt of Claudius, acts and acts at once. Consider again the practical difficulties that must have confronted him. To lead a revolt against the King is no easy matter. Hamlet, as the people's favourite and the heir apparent, could easily foment a revolt or effect an assassination, and dare

the consequence more easily than Lærtes. Yet just a little suspicion is enough to stir Lærtes to hazardous action.

When the warth of Lærtes is turned against Hamlet, observe how he proceeds. To avenge the murder of his father, no treachery is too mean. He is ready to take full advantage of Hamlet being 'most generous and free from contriving.' When the King cautiously suggests only an unbated foil, Lærtes is ready to anoint the edge with poison. He fully approves of the poisoned cup, which Claudius suggests as a further reserve. He does not hesitate to lie: he pretends to be personally satisfied with Hamlet's apology, while applying poison at the point of the sword. It is difficult to think of Hamlet achieving his ends through secret poisoning. Prof. Bradley even suggests that an instinctive repugance to fall upon an unarmed and defenceless man may have had something to do with the fatal hesitation of the prayer-scene.

Lærtes' reckless readiness to act in a noble cause evokes our admiration and for sometime at least makes him look more admirable than Hamlet. Yet after all, it is only the grace of health shining in contrast with the weakness and ugliness of disease. Hamlet in health would always have won in any comparison with Lærtes. Hamlet is infinitely more sensitive, more capable and just. Where Lærtes shines, he owes nothing to himself and everything to the accident of health. And where he suffers in comparison, the fault is all his. He proves an apt pupil of the crafty Claudius and dies with a lie on his lips. And that he preserves his health while Hamlet loses his, is due in part to the chances of fortune, and in part to the coarser texture of his own mind, which is capable neither of the faith nor of the disenchantment of Hamlet.

Hamlet and the Spirit of the Elizabethan Age

The Elizabethans, wrote John Richard Green, discovered a new heaven and a new earth. Here we have a complete epitome of the spirit of the Elizabethan age, its urge for exploration, its adventurous curiosity and its search for new ideals. Knowledge of the achievements of Greece and Rome made the Elizabethans look beyond the somewhat narrow confines of the civilisation of mediæval Christendom. Their restless energy found an outlet in the colonisation of America, trade with the Indies, and the circumnavigation of the globe. Revolt against the dictation of the Pope stirred independent thinking on religion. Bacon laid the foundations of the method of science in outlining the principles of inductive logic, or as he called it, the *Novum Organum*, the new instrument for the discovery of knowledge. The Elizabethans were filled with a restless curiosity about everything on heaven and earth : and in action as in speech, they were both boisterous and bold.

Hamlet may be described as the greatest work of the greatest poet of the age. It has become, like Goethe's *Faust*, a testament of the human spirit. In spite however of its enduring interest for all time, it is the most topical of Shakespeare's works. Half its obscurity is due to its intimate relation to the age. A fairly full account is given elsewhere of the manner in which the play gives pointed expression to representative points of view about the nature of ghosts. In another essay, it has been shown that the political situation in Denmark can be explained only in the light of English practice and convention. Contemporary stage gossip figures in the play in violation of all historic sense. The affected jargon of the court is satirised in the figure of Osric, and there is perhaps a glance at the siege of Ostend in the famous

Fortinbras soliloquy. And lastly there is at least some basis for the various conjectures which identify the hero of the play with some great and well-known contemporary of Shakespeare. There are however only the external indications of the age in which the work was produced.

Look again at the nature of the story. Its violent sensationalism has often been remarked on. The Elizabethans had tough nerves and loved 'strong stuff.' The works of Webster, Marston, and Ford and Shakespeare's own *Titus Andronicus* illustrate the fashion and taste of the age. Yet in their love for the whole gamut of passion and crime being portrayed on the stage, the contemporaries of Shakespeare were perhaps giving an unconscious hint about their spirit of adventure and exploration. They wished to map out the unknown terrain of the human spirit even as the great explorers chartered unknown seas and enlarged the boundaries of geographical knowledge.

Hamlet belongs to the same school as *Titus Andronicus*, but it is more refined. Its melodrama is subordinated to a psychological study of genius. Nevertheless in its daring, it is fully representative of the age, and shows the higher reaches of the somewhat crude bombast and bluster with which the spacious days of good Queen Bess are often associated.

Even more important is the spirit which is manifested by *Hamlet*. It depicts a soured idealist turning the world inside out and questioning the basic foundations of faith. Mr Shaw has condemned the cynical pessimism which informs the play as the outlook of a sated debauchee. Here we see the extent to which Hamlet's probe explores into the vitals of our spiritual life. Hamlet's declaration,

There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,

is in some subtle way indicative of the width and range of the Elizabethan outlook on life. The play raises questions which 'knock for answer at every heart.' There are meditations on fate and free will, life and death, the apparent lack of connection between virtue and happiness. To quote Brandes: "Three hundred years after his creation, Hamlet is still the confidant and friend of sad and thoughtful souls in every land. There is something unique in this. With such piercing vision has Shakespeare searched out the depths of his own, and at the same time of all human nature, and so boldly and surely has he depicted the outward semblance of what he saw, that centuries later, men of every country and of every race have felt their being moulded like wax in his hand, and have seen themselves in his poetry as in a mirror." In doing all this Shakespeare was only giving classic and undying expression to the dreams and ambitions of his contemporaries.

Dramatic Criticism in *Hamlet*.

Of all the plays of Shakspeare, *Hamlet*. is perhaps the one in which the author reveals himself most, both intentionally and unintentionally. There can be little doubt that Shakespeare states here through Hamlet's mouth his own ideas on art and drama and acting and illustrates his theory by practical criticism in one or two places. The fact that the dramatic relevance of the passages containing both the theory and practice of Shakespeare's dramatic criticism has been doubted, suggests all the more that they give expression to the poet's own opinions.

Let us consider first the statement of theory. It is found in Hamlet's advice to the actors in III. 2. The purpose of playing,⁺ says Hamlet, is 'to hold as it were the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own feature and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.' Shakespear thus starts with Aristotle's famous dictum that all art is imitation of nature. Drama is thus not a creation in or out of the void. It is closely and intimately related to life. Human passions and feelings must be accurately represented. And it is one of the functions of drama to portray contemporary life and manners. Actors, as Hamlet observes elsewhere, are the abstract and brief chronicles of every age: in other words, there are the true historians. 'After your death,' says Hamlet to Polonius, 'you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill-report while you live.' It is of course throughout implied that drama is not a mere mechanical photography of life, but a representation of it with creative selectiveness.

Yet another principle that Shakespeare enunciates for the guidance of both actors and playwrights is that they should not overstep the modesty of nature. Shakespeare always abhorred exaggeration and in acting too he lays down the rule of the golden mean: 'for in the very torrent, tempest, and as I may say, the whirlwind of the passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. Art cannot be disorderd: it must have control and design. It is not an incoherent picture life, where sometimes passions may be torn to tatters, and at others feelings and emotions do not rise above the level of commonplace.

⁺'Playing' in this context seems to stand for both acting and playwriting.

But it is a picture with a purpose and a plan, where select features are arranged according to a design.

It is also clear from Hamlet's professed opinions that Shakespeare despised the taste of the masses. He did not believe in the voice of the people as the voice of God. However it may work in politics, the opinion of the majority of the people cannot rule in matters of art. Hamlet speaks contemptuously of 'the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumbshows and noise.' Clowns, he complains, are generally allowed to speak 'more than is set down for them'. Here too, pandering to the tastes of the masses is a sin against the artistic conscience. It is in fact 'villainous and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.' To out-herod Herod, to overplay Termagant, and to tear a passion to tatters may earn applause from the pit, but it will make the judicious grieve and their 'censure' must in our 'allowance outweigh a whole theatre of others'.

On style also Shakespeare has some interesting things to say. To have sallets in the lines to make the matter savoury or to have matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affectation is to adopt a wrong style. To eschew these is to follow 'an honest method, as wholesome as sweet and very much more handsome than fine.' Such a style may be caviare to the general but it will be approved by Hamlet and others, whose judgment in such matters cried in the top of his. And like the play-wright, the actor too must not overstep the modesty of nature. He must suit the action to the world and the word to the action, but never be guilty of exaggeration. There should be no overdoing or coming tardy off. The actor must neither strut and bellow, nor be too tame. When the

actor playing the part of Lucianus acts like a melodramatic villain before poisoning his uncle, Hamlet exclaims roughly: "Leave thy damnable faces and begin."

Hamlet illustrates these principles by criticism of the speech from the Aeneas and Dido play and comments on the *Murder of Gonzago*. He praises the former unreservedly. He thinks that it is free from indecencies and affectations. And possibly the word 'mobled' (which he seems to object to) he looks upon as too affected. As Prof. Bradley says, it is difficult to think of Shakespeare or Hamlet as being ironical in praise of that speech. Its style however, seems to us to show signs of bombast, and some of its similes are to say the least grotesque figures. These defects, however, are usual with Shakespeare, and if Hamlet's taste is not impeccable, according to modern standards, the reason is Shakespeare's own defective taste or education. In the *Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet's own speech, (the speech of Lucianus) if a trifle melodramatic, is artistic and effective, and in it he has suited the word to the deed, without overstepping the modesty of nature

The Popularity of *Hamlet*.

Hamlet is without doubt the most popular play in English literature. "None of Shakespeare's plays has so often been acted in Great Britain, nor in so many foreign countries" writes Mr. Harold Child "and probably more actors have appeared in the part in which, according to Macready, 'a total failure is of rare occurrence' than in any other." And this popularity has in it something more enduring than the fashion of an age. Says a poem of 1604: "Faith it should please

all, like "Prince Hamlet". Few have differed from that verdict in the three centuries that have since elapsed. If we may quote a recent opinion, Prof. Bradley points out that 'in the great ideal movement which began towards the close of the eighteenth century, this tragedy acquired a position unique among Shakespeare's dramas and shared only by Goethe's *Faust* and that 'it is to-day the most popular of Shakespeare's tragedies on the stage.' It is particularly necessary to note that this appeal of the *Hamlet* is not confined to any particular class of people. It has evoked the admiration of the mass of readers and the select circle of critical students: and when put on boards, it has proved equally popular with the pit and the dress-circle.

What are the reasons for this enduring popularity, this widespread appeal to readers and play-goers of all classes? In the first place, there is in *Hamlet* a rattling good story told with skill and effectiveness. Its plot has all the elements of the shilling shocker—murder, accident and sudden death. "Suppose you were to describe the plot of Hamlet," writes Prof. Bradley, "to a person quite ignorant of the play, and suppose you were careful to tell your hearer nothing about Hamlet's character, what impression would your sketch make on him? Would he not exclaim: 'What a sensational story: Why, here are some eight violent deaths, not to speak of adultery, a ghost, a mad woman and a fight in the grave?' And these features of the plot appeal to all sorts of people. "There is something wrong in you" says Chesterton, 'if you do not like a detective story."

The story is not merely sensational in substance, but it is also developed, as Mr. Verity points out, 'by the essential method of dramatic "action"—that is,

through great happenings, great crises.' Consider the arresting effectiveness of the very first scene of the play, where with marvellous economy of means, an atmosphere of awe and terror is swiftly created. The meeting of Hamlet with the ghost is one of the highlights of the play, and every great actor has tried to ring changes on the effect of this scene. Even Dr. Johnson was so far affected as to put it on record that 'the apparition in Act I chills the blood with horror.' Take again that 'miracle of picturesqueness and melodrama' the play-scene, which brings to a conclusion as exciting a detection of the murderer as any told by Dorothy Sayers or Ellery Queen. Shakespeare's achievement in bringing about this effect is all the greater because he lays, as it were, all the cards on the table at the beginning of the play and discloses both the murderer and the murder at the same time. The bed-room scene, the fight in the grave and the fencing match at the end are all in their own way packed with thrills.

There is in *Hamlet* however, much more than a Punch and Judy melodrama effectively developed. Gabriel Harvey, no less a person than a Cambridge Don, wrote in or around 1600 that Shakespeare's *Lucrece* 'and his tragedie of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, have it in them to please the wiser sort. Prof. Dover Wilson underlines this view, with a statement of reasons as well: "The longest of all Shakespeare's plays and the turning point of his spiritual and artistic development, *Hamlet* is also the cross roads of Shakesperean criticism, at which all the highways and every conceivable lane and field path seem to converge."

For the critical student, the most outstanding feature of the play is the character of the hero.

Having laid on the shoulders of Hamlet the duty of vengeance, at every stage Shakespeare makes us ask, "Will he fulfil it?" He has made Hamlet real and intelligible, though at the same time he has made of the character of the hero an entrancing mystery. To put it crudely, the personality of Hamlet arouses in us the same interest and curiosity which an unsolved murder in a detective story does. Of course he has lifted the theme to a higher level, from the level of material fact to the level of the workings of the spirit: and by doing so, he has made Hamlet a figure of perennial interest. We read a detective story with absorbing interest until the criminal is found out and the hero outwits us in the game of deduction and inference. But rarely do we go back to the story or try to read it for a second time. The mystery of Hamlet's character is in a different category. You can read up all the solutions published so far, and can yet come back to it without losing interest, and per chance find something new. For the connoisseur in critical appreciation, the character of Hamlet is a refined and never ending cross-word puzzle for the ordinary reader, it suggests unfathomable depths by its mystery and at the same time it is convincingly human and overwhelmingly real.

There are other causes too for *Hamlet's* popularity. It is among the most gnostic of Shakespeare's plays. It is full of phrases that stick in the memory. Consider for instance

There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,

or the phrase 'caviare to the general,' or the cliché "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

Again it bristles with questions which "knock for answer at every heart": it deals with the fundamental issues of life and has meditations on fate, foreknowledge and free will. There is again a wide range of character-interest. There is also the ghost, always an interesting figure for all audiences. For actors, the character of Hamlet offers great scope for achievement. There is nothing settled and final about the interpretation of the Prince of Denmark. Within a vague, but fairly clear outline, there is infinite scope for variety and originality: and great actors have never been loth to take advantage of this. Finally, it may be mentioned that the tragedy of Hamlet suggests to all according to the measure of their wisdom and insight the mystery inherent in life—"the sense of the soul's infinity and the sense of the doom which not only circumscribes that infinity but appears to be its offspring."